shoulder a coffin
kuro
Vol. 3

棺担ぎのクロ。
懐中旅話
～カイチュウタビワ～

3

きゆづきさとこ

KR COMICS

棺担ぎのクロ。 懐中旅話 3 きゆづきさとこ

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shoulder a coffin "kuro"
Satoko Kiyuzuki, Houbunsha

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kuro
Vol. 3

shoulder & collar

kuro

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椛担ぎのクロ。

旅中旅話

～ハナタビノワ～

3

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椛担ぎのクロ。～旅中旅話～ 3

きゆづきさとこ

shoulder & collar

kuro

Vol. 3

An unusual evening.
Under the unusual moonlight...
An unusual sameane.
And a samewhat unusual canversatian is had.

Characters

Sen
(partner)
Kuro
(protagonist)
Nijuku
(man-
made)
Sanju
(man-
made)

THAT'S WHY.
But I thought it was easy going from here.

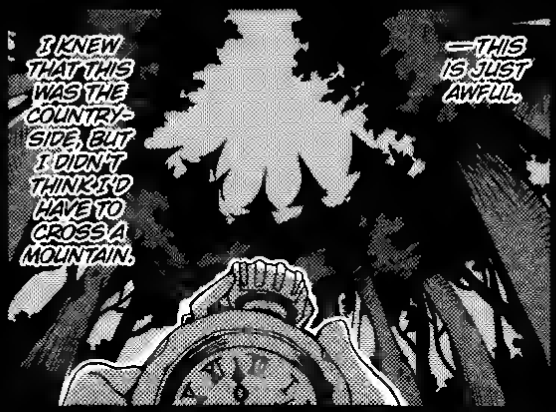
THE PATH ISN'T AS STEEP AFTER THIS. SO WE SHOULD MAKE IT THERE BEFORE THE SUN SETS.
SINCE WE'VE ARRIVED AT THE MARSH, WE PROBABLY HAVE ABOUT ONE MORE MOUNTAIN TO TRAVERSE.
WOW, WE SURE CLIMBED PRETTY HIGH.

FOR THOSE TWO, AN EASY ROAD YIELDS MORE DANGER.

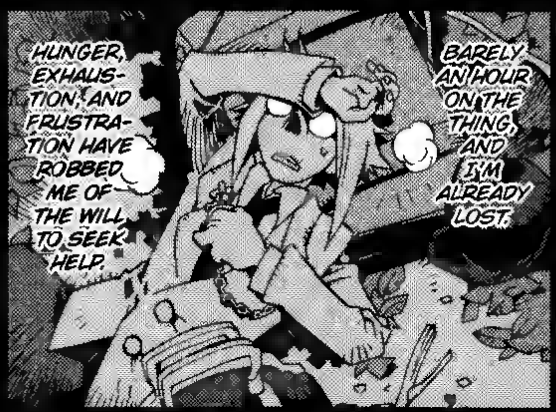
IT'S A LIFE-LINE.
JUST IN CASE, CONSIDERING THE ROAD AHEAD OF US.
HM?
WHAT'S WITH THAT ROPE AROUND YOUR WAIST?

Shoulder-a-Coffin
KURO
WHAT'RE YOU TWO DOING!?
WELL, SEE! MORE THAN THE SKY OVER THERE...
...THE SKY IN HERE LOOKED EASIER TO REEEACH!

THAT WON'T BE NECES-SARY.
THAT...
We can't send for a doctor in the middle of the mountains after all.
THANK GOOD-NESS. YOU'RE ALIVE.

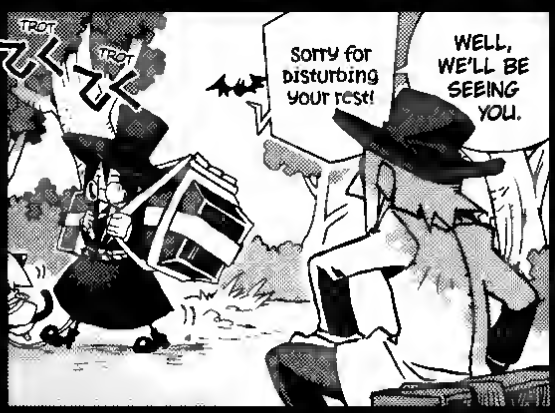

I KNEW THAT THIS WAS THE COUNTRY-SIDE, BUT I DIDN'T THINK I'D HAVE TO CROSS A MOUNTAIN.
—THIS IS JUST AWFUL.

AH, there was a capital famous for its medical studies thereabouts, if memory serves.
I'M A DOCTOR.
I STUDIED IN THE ROYAL CAPITAL ON THE EASTERN CONTI-NENT.
WHAT BRINGS A DOCTOR HERE?

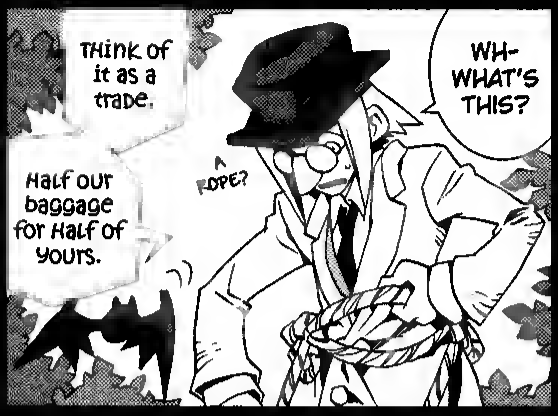

HUNGER, EXHAUS-TION, AND FRUSTRA-TION HAVE ROBBED ME OF THE WILL TO SEEK HELP.
BARELY AN HOUR ON THE THING, AND I'M ALREADY LOST.

HUH.
SO YOU'RE GOING THE SAME WAY WE ARE.
...I'M HEADING FOR THE VILLAGE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THIS MOUN-TAIN.

PERHAPS I'LL JUST DIE HERE...

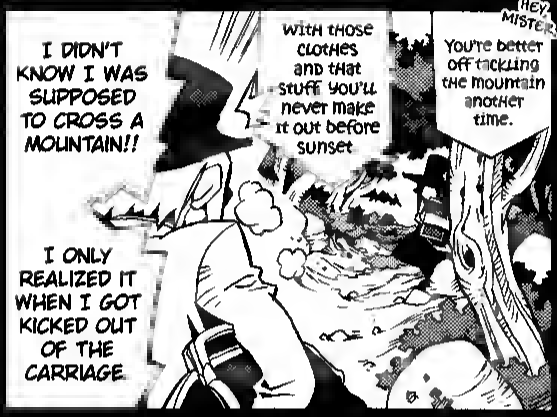

TROT
TROT
Sorry for disturbing your rest!
WELL, WE'LL BE SEEING YOU.

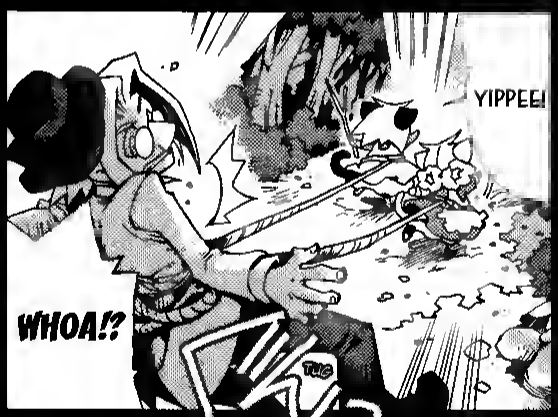
A FUNER-AL?
WAIT, I'M NOT READY FOR A FUNERAL YET!!
ガバッ


THINK OF IT AS A TRADE.
HALF OUR BAGGAGE FOR HALF OF YOURS.
A ROPE?
WH-WHAT'S THIS?

WELL, WE ARE GOING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION.
BUT IS HE REALLY PLANNING ON GETTING THROUGH THE MOUNTAIN WITH ALL THOSE THINGS?
WOOSH
OH, HE CAME AFTER US.

YEAH.
CAN WE GO NOW?
KURO-CHAN, CAN WE?


I DIDN'T KNOW I WAS SUPPOSED TO CROSS A MOUNTAIN!!
I ONLY REALIZED IT WHEN I GOT KICKED OUT OF THE CARRIAGE.
WITH THOSE CLOTHES AND THAT STUFF YOU'LL NEVER MAKE IT OUT BEFORE SUNSET
HEY, MISTER
YOU'RE BETTER OFF TACKLING THE MOUNTAIN ANOTHER TIME.

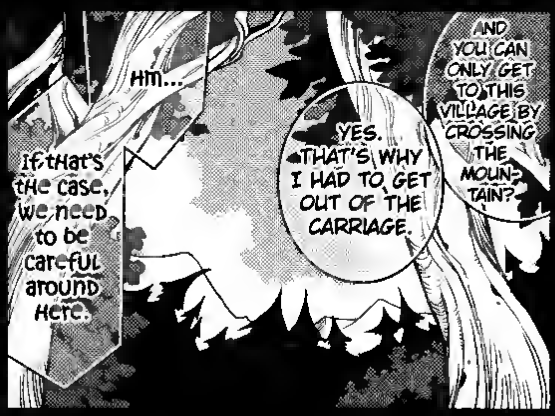

YIPPEE!
WHOA!?
TUG

KUTO, WHY DON'T YOU CARRY HALF HIS STUFF?
I GUESS WE DON'T GOT A CHOICE.
HOW COME WE'RE GETTING YELLED AT?
YOU EXPECT ME TO WALK BACK TO TOWN FROM HERE!?
SO WE'RE GONNA HELP HIM?

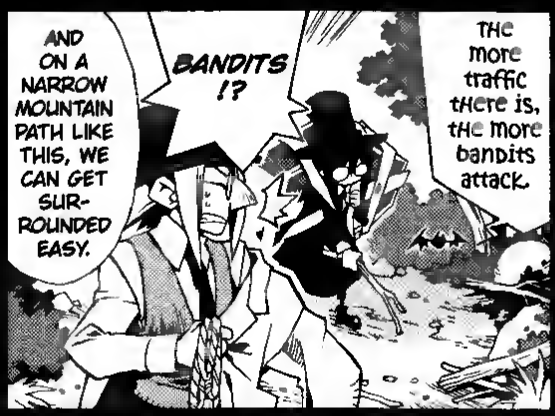
...TO ACHIEVE THE PERFECT SPEED.
COMBINE THE HARE AND THE TORTOISE...
Y-YOU KIDS SHOULD WALK A LITTLE SLOWER !!
HURRY UUUUP MISTER!
FASTER, FASTERRR!
DRAG DRAG DRAG DRAG DRAG
ぞぞぞぞぞ

I KNEW YOU WOULDN'T GO OUTTA YOUR WAY TO HELP SOMEONE FROM THE KINDNESS OF YOUR HEART.
ESPECIALLY SOME GUY.
DON'T YOU WANNA GET SOME SHUT-EYE UNDER A ROOF TOO?
I'M SICK OF SLEEPING ROUGH.

EEK!?

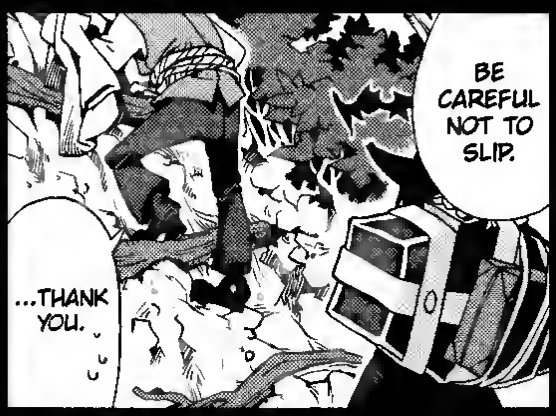

HM...
If that's the case, we need to be careful around here.
YES. THAT'S WHY I HAD TO GET OUT OF THE CARRIAGE.
AND YOU CAN ONLY GET TO THIS VILLAGE BY CROSSING THE MOUNTAIN?

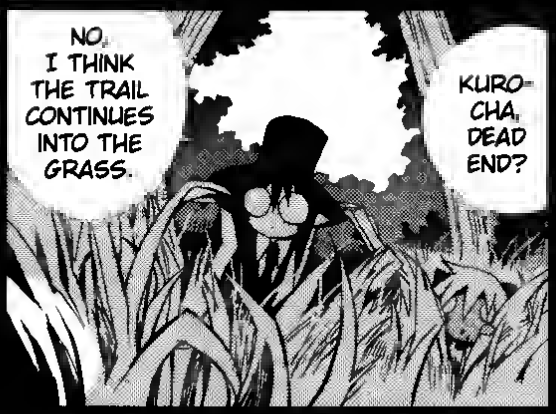
...WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
.....?


AND ON A NARROW MOUNTAIN PATH LIKE THIS, WE CAN GET SURROUNDED EASY.
BANDITS!?
THE MORE TRAFFIC THERE IS, THE MORE BANDITS ATTACK.

It's a steep slope, and the mud's damp and soft.
MAKING FOOTHOLDS.

THAT'LL DO.
HMM. SO IF WE SEE ANYONE SUSPICIOUS...
...THINGS COULD GET HAIRY.....


BE CAREFUL NOT TO SLIP.
...THANK YOU.


NO, I THINK THE TRAIL CONTINUES INTO THE GRASS.
KURO-CHA, DEAD END?

IT'S A BIG, PRETTY LEAF!
LOOKIE! LOOKIE!!
HUH?
WANT IT?

HEY, DOC. HELP HER OUT.
I GUESS WE HAVE TO CHOP OUR WAY OUT.
SNAP
パチン
HOW?

UH... OKAY.
WOULD YOU MIND ACCEPT-ING IT?
IT'LL MAKE THEM HAPPY.

HE'S RIGHT, SEN.
I CAN'T USE MY PRECIOUS TOOLS FOR SOMETHING LIKE THAT!!
DON'T YOU HAVE ANYTHING IN THAT BAG THAT COULD CUT THE UNDER-GROWTH?

LOOKIE, LOOKIE!
I SEE ...
THEY LIKE FINDING THINGS AND SHOWING THEM TO SOME-ONE.

A DOCTOR'S TOOLS ARE FOR SAVING LIVES.
NOT FOR CUTTING BRUSH IN THE WOODS.

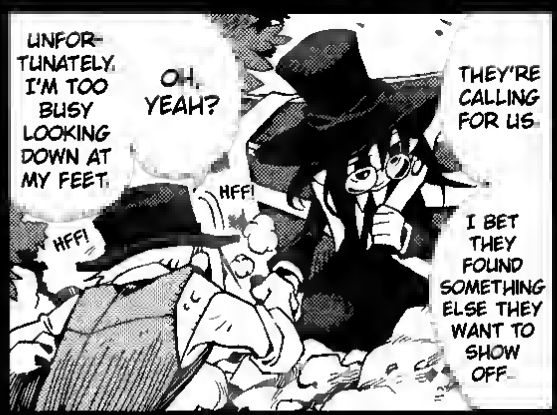
AAAAA-AGHH!!
I GOT A BIG ONE!
I GOT A LOT!
HE SURE COMES IN HANDY.
SQUIRM SQUIRM WIGGLE

"PATH-LESS"?
THEN WHAT DO YOU CALL...
...WHAT YOU'RE WALKING ON RIGHT NOW?

MY ASPIRA-TIONS...
...WERE HIGHER.
...I REALLY DIDN'T WANT TO...
...TAKE A JOB AT A CLINIC IN A REMOTE VILLAGE.

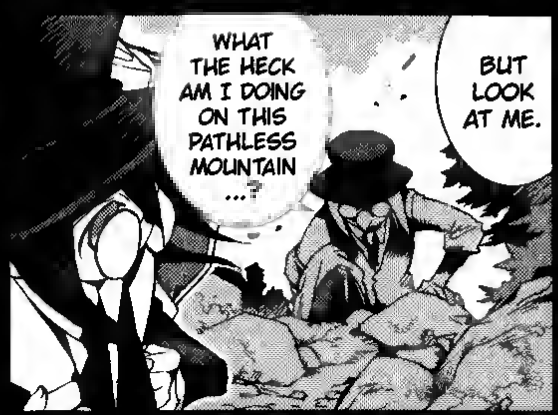
KURO-CHAN! MISTER!
HURRY! HURRY!
OVER HERE! OVER THERE! COME QUICK!

LOOK WHERE YOU'RE STEPPING AND CHECK THAT IT'S STRONG ENOUGH TO HOLD YOUR WEIGHT.
THE incline's getting steeper.
...I COULD HAVE TAKEN OVER FATHER'S HOSPITAL.
IF I HADN'T BEEN BORN THE FOURTH SON...


UNFOR-TUNATELY, I'M TOO BUSY LOOKING DOWN AT MY FEET.
OH, YEAH?
HFF!
HFF!
THEY'RE CALLING FOR US.
I BET THEY FOUND SOMETHING ELSE THEY WANT TO SHOW OFF.

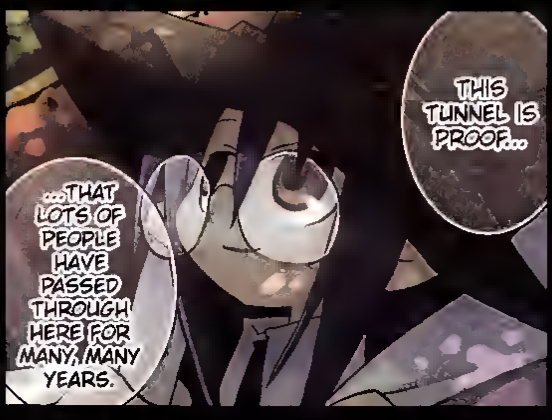
...ARE PROBABLY RIDING IN A CARRIAGE OVER A SMOOTH, PAVED ROAD.
MY UNIVERSITY FRIENDS...

I SEE NOTHING BUT STONES, DIRT, AND TWIGS—

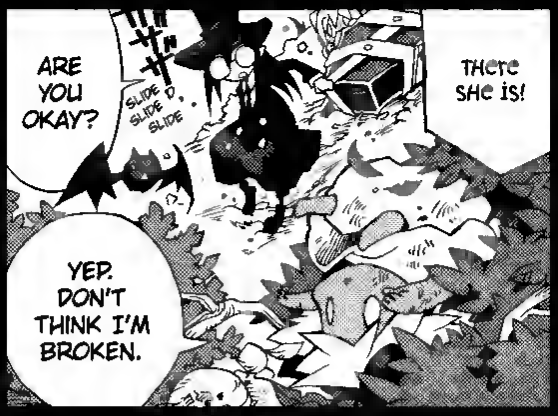

WHAT THE HECK AM I DOING ON THIS PATHLESS MOUNTAIN ...?
BUT LOOK AT ME.

'COS ONCE PEOPLE STOP PASSING OVER IT, A MOUNTAIN PATH VANISHES.
CLEAR THE BRANCHES AND TREES, AND IF THEY GROW BACK, CLEAR THEM AGAIN.
THAT'S REPEATED OVER THE COURSE OF NUMEROUS DECADES.

It's a tunnel of trees.
TUN-NELLL!
FEELS NIIICE!

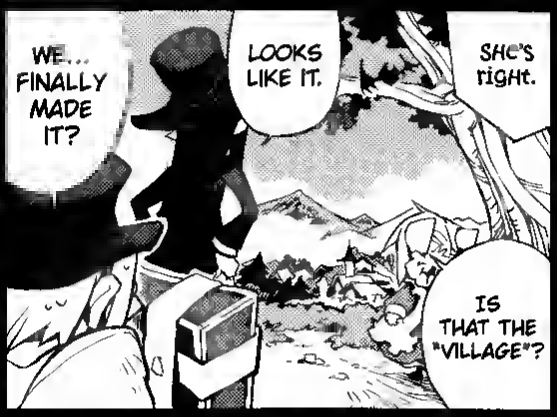

THIS TUNNEL IS PROOF...
...THAT LOTS OF PEOPLE HAVE PASSED THROUGH HERE FOR MANY, MANY YEARS.

IS IT NATU-RAL?
NO.
THIS IS MAN-MADE.


ARE YOU OKAY?
SLIDE D, SLIDE SLIDE
THERE SHE IS!
YEP. DON'T THINK I'M BROKEN.

REALLY?
AH!
I SEE LOTS HOUSES OVER THERE!!

HEY, DON'T LICK YOURSELF. YOU'RE COVERED IN DIRT.
LICK
LICK
OH, brother. you're all scraped up.


WE... FINALLY MADE IT?
LOOKS LIKE IT.
SHE'S right.
IS THAT THE "VILLAGE"?

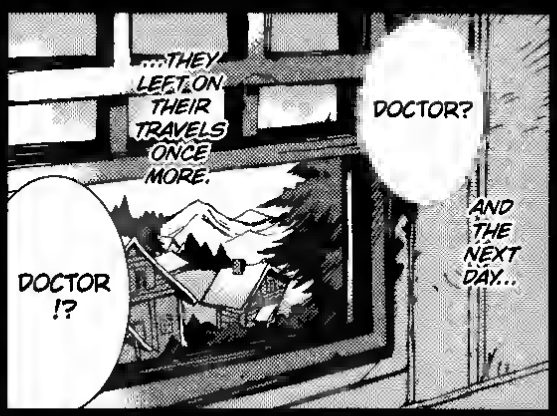
SO LET'S HURRY TO THE VILLAGE.
"CHECK"?
I'LL CHECK YOUR INJURIES OUT.

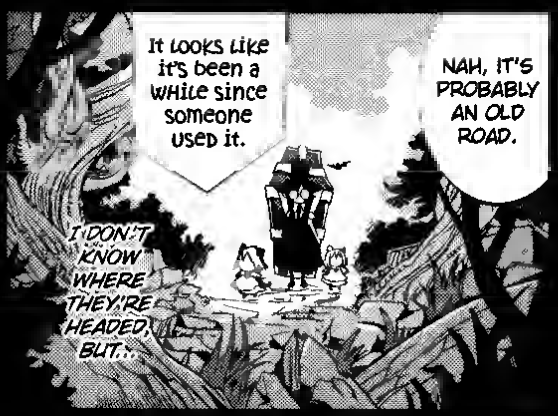
NIJUKU RAN TO THE VILLAGE.
HEY, WHERE'S NIJUKU?
AWW, geez, SHE'S SO impa-tient.

...I'M GOING TO BECOME THE DOCTOR OF THAT VILLAGE.
THAT'S RIGHT. I MAY NOT LOOK LIKE MUCH, BUT...

That ain't the sound of running kid!!
NUH-UH. SHE WENT ROLY-ROLY FROM HERE.

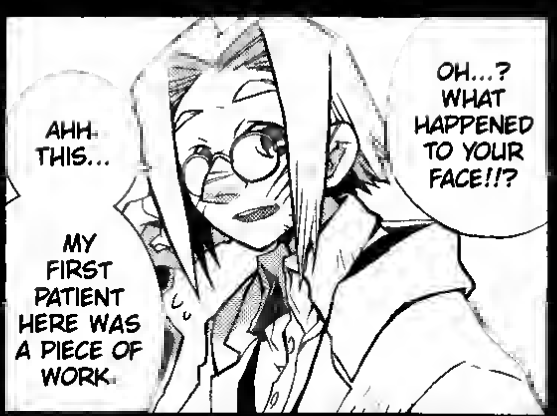
BUT THEIRS CONTIN-UES.
DID we get lost?
.....HM?
MY ROAD, MY STORY ENDS HERE FOR NOW.

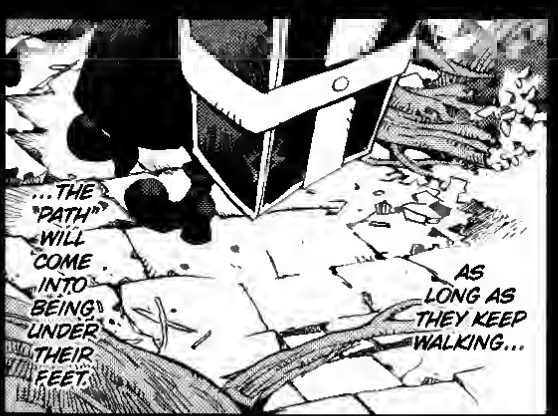

....THEY LEFT ON THEIR TRAVELS ONCE MORE.
DOCTOR?
AND THE NEXT DAY...
DOCTOR !?


It looks like it's been a while since someone used it.
NAH, IT'S PROBABLY AN OLD ROAD.
I DON'T KNOW WHERE THEY'RE HEADED, BUT...

REALLY! I'VE BEEN CALLING YOU FOR THE LAST FEW MINUTES!
EH...HM? HUH? HOW LONG'VE YOU BEEN THERE?

I'm sure it leads some-where.
WELL, SHOULD BE OKAY TO TAKE IT.
...I JUST KNOW THEY'LL FIND A WAY.

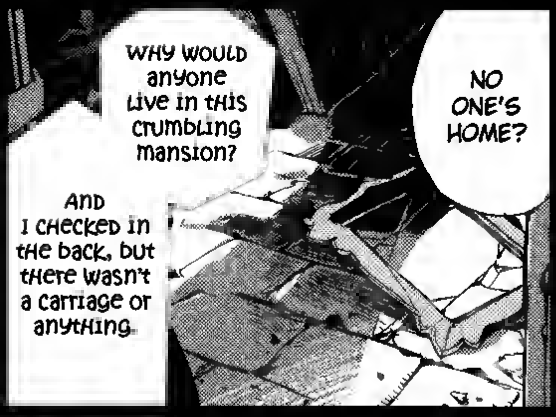

AHH THIS...
MY FIRST PATIENT HERE WAS A PIECE OF WORK.
OH...? WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR FACE!!?


...THE "PATH" WILL COME INTO BEING UNDER THEIR FEET.
AS LONG AS THEY KEEP WALKING...

My ears are still ringing, in case anyone cares.
MY FACE HURTS!
YEP.
NIJUKU, ARE YOUR BOO-BOOS ALL BETTER?
BUT MY EYES AND THROAT HURT TODAY.
RING
HIC

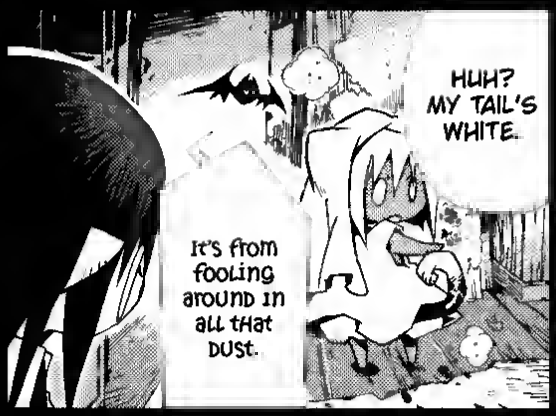
ザアア
WOOOOSH
YOUR HAND, LEMME SEE!
BUT MAN, THIS RAIN...I HOPE IT STOPS BEFORE IT GETS DARK.
YOU MUST'VE CAUGHT IT ON A SHARP BRANCH.
OKAY, THERE YOU GO.
OW, OW, OW, OW.
THERE'S NO TOWN NEARBY.
FOR REAL? DARN...
DRIBBLE
WHAT'S BLEEDING?
PRESS ON IT UNTIL THE BLEEDING STOPS.
But it looks like...
...there's a place where we can take shelter from the rain.

SANJU, PLAY-TIME'S OVER.
YOU NEED TO DRY OFF, OR YOU'LL CATCH A COLD.
LOOK, MY HAND LEAVES A MARK.


WHY WOULD anyone live in this crumbling mansion?
AND I CHECKED IN THE BACK, BUT there wasn't a carriage or anything.
NO ONE'S HOME?

I GUESS YOU'RE THE BIG SISTER, AFTER ALL.
IN COMPARISON, YOU'RE AWFULLY QUIET, NIJUKU.
.....

probably other people like us who just stopped by.
BUT SOMEONE MADE A FIRE HERE RECENTLY.


HUH? MY TAIL'S WHITE.
It's from fooling around in all that DUST.

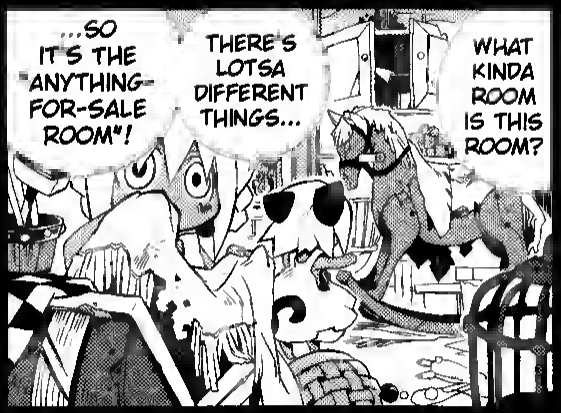
IS SOMEONE in there?
PUFF
PUFF
もく
...WHITE SMOKE?

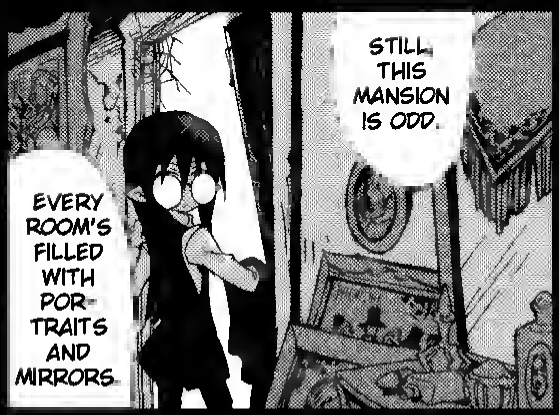
SNFF
すんっ

WHEN THE HECK DID YOU GUYS GET IN HERE?
WHUMP
はふぃ
WHUMP
はふぅ

LOTSA PEOPLE INSIDE.
LOTSA PICTURES.
OH, SHE'S SULKING.
JUST THE TWO OF US.
WE'RE GONNA 'SPLORE!
DUNNO, BUT IT'S SOME-THING SCARY.
WHAT'S A GHOST?
THEN THIS IS THE "GHOST ROOM"!
REALLY!?
I'LL LET YOU BE "CAP'N" TODAY, SANJU.
FOR REAL!?
OH? CAP'N! CAP'N!
THERE'S SOMEONE MOVING INSIDE THAT PICTURE!
"SWAMP ROOM"?
LET'S CROSS THIS "SWAMP ROOM" FIRST—
THEN WE LEAVE FOR OUR 'SPLORA-TION!
AYE, CAP'N!
WE NEED TO CROSS USING HIGH PLACES.
YEAH. THE FLOOR IS A "SWAMP," SO WE'RE
SINK.

YOU'RE SUCH A LUSH, GEEZ.
Damn, all the wine's gone bad.


...SO IT'S THE "ANYTHING-FOR-SALE ROOM"!
THERE'S LOTSA DIFFERENT THINGS...
WHAT KINDA ROOM IS THIS ROOM?


STILL, THIS MANSION IS ODD.
EVERY ROOM'S FILLED WITH PORTRAITS AND MIRRORS.

LOOKIE! LOOKIE! I'M THE BIGGEST, BESTEST CAP'N!!
THEN, I'M THE BIGGEST, BESTEST SOLDIER!!

MAYBE, BUT...
...IT'S PRETTY EERIE.
Isn't that what rich people who love themselves are into?

WE'LL MAKE HER GUESS WHICH ONE'S THE BIGGEST AND BESTEST!
HEY, HEY! LET'S GO SHOW KURO-CHA!

I FEEL LIKE NO MATTER WHERE WE GO IN HERE, WE'RE BEING WATCHED...

DRAG
DRAG

SANJU, YOU'RE MAD AGAIN?
I'M NOT TALKING TO KURO-CHAN ANYMORE!
SHE CAN'T EVEN TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ME AND NIJUKU.
LOOKIE! LOOKIE! WHAT DO YOU THINK?
UH, YEAH.
LOOKS GOOD ON YOU BOTH.
DOES IT LOOK GOOD ON US?
YOU CARED
ME!
KURO-CHA IS KURO-CHA.
BUT THE PROFESSOR IS THE PROFESSOR.
THE PROFESSOR ALWAYS GOT IT RIGHT.
URGH...
YOU HAFTA SAY WHICH IS WHICH!
YOU CAN'T SAY "BOTH"!
NOT AGAIN
NOW, Wait, Kuro. Leave it to me.
IT'S NOT THAT I HATE BEING MISTAKEN!
...YOU REALLY HATE GETTING MISTAKEN FOR ME?
...you gotta call her by her name.
Before Kuro says anything...
...THAT SHE CAN'T GUESS RIGHT THAT IT'S ME.
I JUST DON'T LIKE...
I guess now we know that one's a simpleton and one's a sly little fox...
KURO-CHA.
TCH!
THEY FIGURED IT OUT.

FSSSSH
ァァァァ

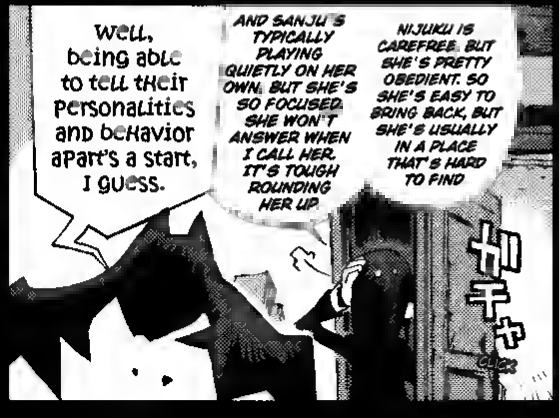
OH, BOY. IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE SHE'S GOTTEN SO TICKED OFF AT ME.
WELL, IT'S A GOOD THING.
IT MEANS THAT SHE'S FOSTERING A SENSE OF SELF.

THERE'S A LULL IN THE RAIN.
WE SHOULD BE READY TO LEAVE AT ANY TIME.
BUT LET'S WAIT IT OUT A BIT LONGER.

WELL, YEAH!
THAT'S WHY IF THOSE TWO DO IT ON PURPOSE, I GOTTA GIVE UP.
...YOU'RE LOSING FACE AS THEIR GUARDIAN.
BUT FOR YOU TO NOT BE ABLE TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN THEM...

I'M SURE THEY'RE PLAYING SOMEWHERE IN THE HOUSE.
I'LL GO LOOK FOR THEM.
SO WHERE'D THOSE TWO GO OFF TO?

BESIDES, I'VE NEVER THOUGHT OF MYSELF...
...AS THEIR GUARDIAN.


WELL, BEING ABLE TO TELL THEIR PERSONALITIES AND BEHAVIOR APART'S A START, I GUESS.
AND SANJU'S TYPICALLY PLAYING QUIETLY ON HER OWN, BUT SHE'S SO FOCUSED, SHE WON'T ANSWER WHEN I CALL HER. IT'S TOUGH ROUNDING HER UP.
NIJUKU IS CAREFREE, BUT SHE'S PRETTY OBEDIENT. SO SHE'S EASY TO BRING BACK, BUT SHE'S USUALLY IN A PLACE THAT'S HARD TO FIND
ガチャ
CLICK

WE MAY BE TRAVELING TOGETHER NOW...
...BUT ONE DAY, WE'RE GOING TO GO OUR SEPARATE WAYS.

TEE-HEE!
I'VE BEEN WAITING ALL THIS TIME.
ARE YOU ME?
SANJUUU! WHERE ARE YOU GUYS?
NIJU-KUUU!
YUP! THAT'S RIGHT.
WAITING?
FOR ME?
WE'RE GONNA LEAVE SOOON!
AND...
...FOR YOU TO...
...BE ALLL ALONE.
LURCH
? NIJUKU?
C'MERE! C'MERE!
I FOUND A GOOD HIDING PLACE.
—...
SANJU?
OVER HERE, OVER HERE!
TOK'
!!

SURE.
!!
I DON'T WANNA BE IN THIS ROOM.
LET'S GO, 'KAY?

!!
KURO-CHAN!!
BEHIND

I'M GOING TOO!
THUD
NO!! LEMME OUT!!

HUH? WHY?
WHY'M I ON THIS SIDE?
THERE YOU ARE.

DON'T LEAVE ME!
DON'T GO!

I'M STILL MAD AT KURO-CHAN!
WHY'RE YOU SAYING SORRY!?
WHOA
I'M SORRY...
...FOR WORRY-ING YOU, KURO-CHAN.

SLAM
KURO-CHAAAN —!!

LEER

—HEYYY.

KURO-CHAN...
UU...
HIC...

...CRYING UPSIDE DOWN?

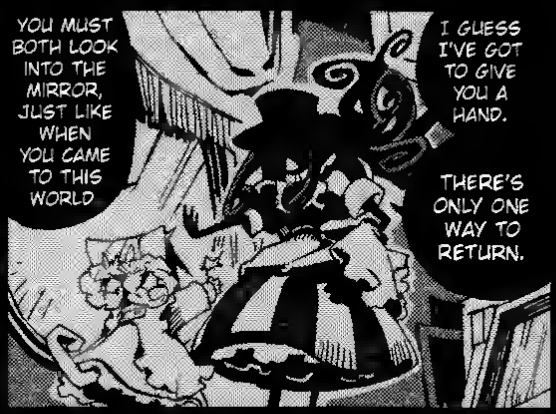
WHY ARE YO!!...

!!
LOOK AROUND YOU. CAN YOU STILL SAY THAT?

AND YOU'RE THE ONE WHO'S UPSIDE DOWN!
I'M NOT CRYING!
REALLY?

THERE ARE THE SAME THINGS AND THE SAME PEOPLE...
...BUT ALL ARE DIFFERENT THINGS AND DIFFERENT PEOPLE.
THIS PLACE IS WHAT YOU WOULD CALL THE WORLD ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MIRROR.
ARE YOU SOMEONE FROM THAT WORLD?
WHICH WORLD?
...AND IS WHEN YOUR BODIES AND WORLDS SWITCH PLACES.
THAT MOMENT IS SUPPOSEDLY CALLED "DOPPEL"- SOMETHING OR OTHER...
—BUT SOMETIMES, BOTH OF YOU WILL BE DOING THE SAME THING.
THAT'S WHY EVEN IF YOU'RE IN THE SAME PLACE, YOU'LL BE DOING DIFFERENT THINGS.
YOU KNEW ME?
SORT OF.
I WASN'T SURE ABOUT YOU, BUT YOU REALLY DID COME TO THIS SIDE.
THERE ARE MANY GATEWAYS THAT CONNECT THE TWO WORLDS HERE.
THIS MANSION ESPECIALLY HAS MANY MIRRORS AND PICTURES, RIGHT?
HEY!
DON'T WIPE YOUR NOSE ON ME!!
...I'LL THINK ABOUT I—
BUT IF YOU GET DOWN ON YOUR KNEES AND BEG...
UNFORTUNATELY, PEOPLE IN THIS WORLD ARE NOT SO NICE.
HMM, I WONDER IF I SHOULD HELP YOU?
I WANNA GO BACK TO THAT SIDE!
WHAT DO I GOTTA DO?

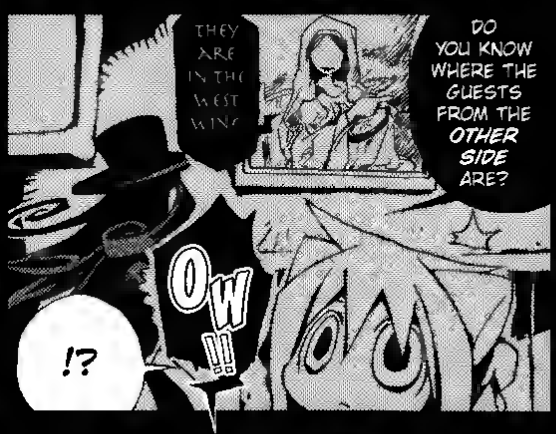
WHAT'S WRONG?
NOTHIN'!


YOU MUST BOTH LOOK INTO THE MIRROR, JUST LIKE WHEN YOU CAME TO THIS WORLD
I GUESS I'VE GOT TO GIVE YOU A HAND.
THERE'S ONLY ONE WAY TO RETURN.

I ALMOST STEPPED ON THIS.
OH, ONE OF SEN.

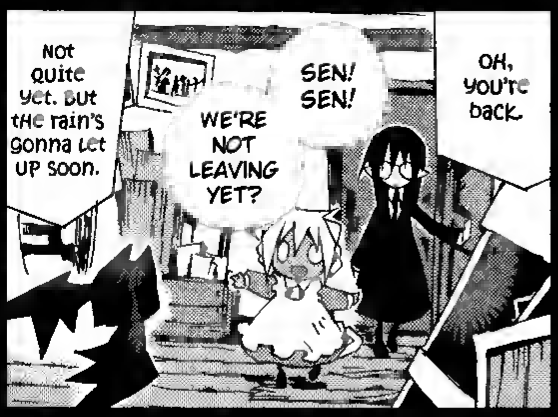
SO FIRST...
...WE HAVE TO LOCATE YOU IN THE OTHER WORLD.

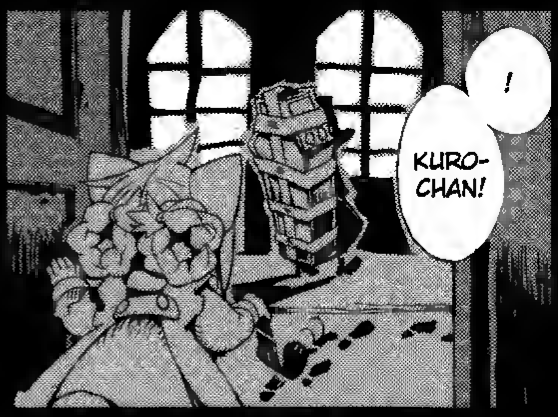
IT WOULD BE HANDY IF I COULD DIVIDE MY BODY IN TWO OR THREE.
FLAP
WELL, THERE'S ONE RIGHT THERE, SEE?
FLAP


DO YOU KNOW WHERE THE GUESTS FROM THE OTHER SIDE ARE?
THEY ARE IN THE WEST WING
OW!!
!?

LOOK, ANOTHER KURO-CHAN!
THAT'S JUST ME IN THE MIRROR.
BUT GEEZ, THIS PLACE SURE IS FULL OF MIRRORS. HUH?

?
DID I JUST HEAR SEN?

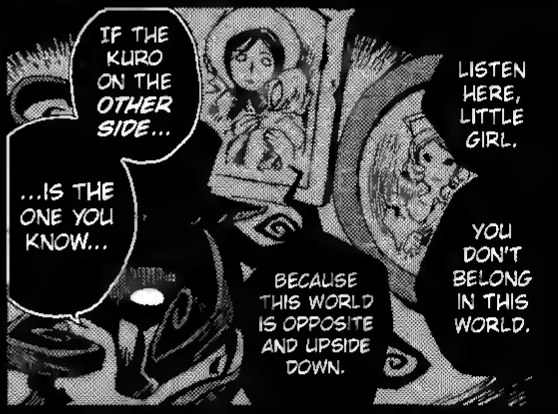

Not quite yet. But the rain's gonna let up soon.
SEN! SEN!
WE'RE NOT LEAVING YET?
OH, you're back.


!
KURO-CHAN!

Y'KNOW. I DON'T KNOW.
HER MOOD WAS BETTER WHEN I RAN INTO HER AGAIN
YOU guys made UP, HUH?
LET'S GO! LET'S GO!

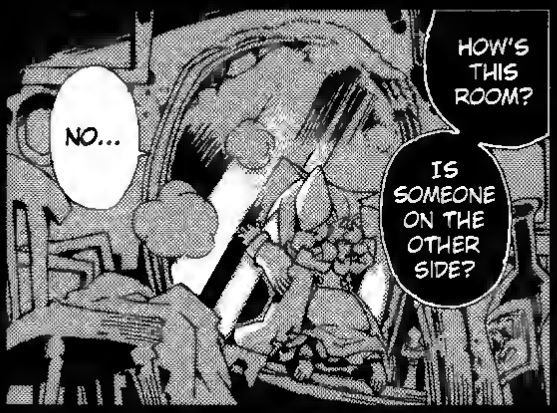
THAT'S KURO-CHAN!
WHY NOT?
STOP!
YOU SHOULDN'T CARELESSLY GET CLOSE.

YEAH...
BUT I WONDER WHY...
That's good.
Saves us one trouble.


IF THE KURO ON THE OTHER SIDE...
...IS THE ONE YOU KNOW...
LISTEN HERE, LITTLE GIRL.
BECAUSE THIS WORLD IS OPPOSITE AND UPSIDE DOWN.
YOU DON'T BELONG IN THIS WORLD.

...SEEMS CLOUDY TODAY.
...I FEEL LIKE SANJU'S SMILE RIGHT NOW...

...THE KURO IN THIS WORLD...
...IS NOT A KURO...
...YOU OUGHT TO GET CLOSE TO.


NO...
HOW'S THIS ROOM?
IS SOMEONE ON THE OTHER SIDE?

I THOUGHT SHE'D BE HERE BY NOW.
OH, RIGHT.
SO WHERE'S THE OTHER ONE?

YOU'RE RIGHT. THE HALL MIRROR IS TOO.
DARK?
I CAN'T SEE.
IT'S DARK INSIDE THE MIRROR.

!!
OH, NIJUKU.
I SAW HER ON MY WAY BACK, BUT...
NIJUKU-UUUU!

SANJU?
What are you doing?

...AND TRIED TO SAY SOMETHING WITH TEARS IN HER EYES.
...SHE LOOKED AT SANJU FOR A SECOND, AND THEN AT ME...

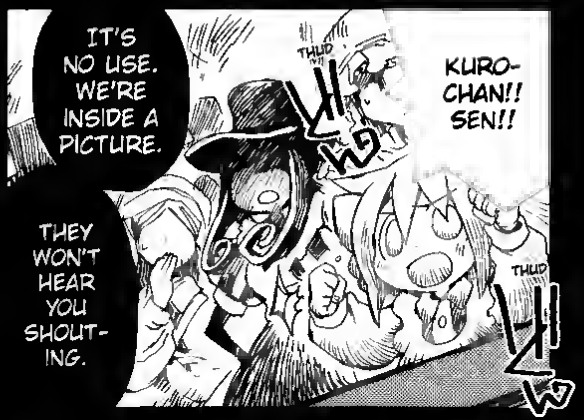
OH.
NOTHIN'!

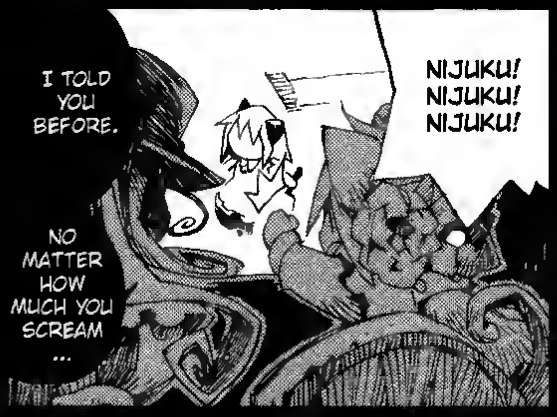
...makes it sound like a person walking in on her lover cheating.
THAT EXPLANATION...
THEN SHE RAN AWAY AT FULL SPEED.
WHAT THE HECK WAS THAT ABOUT?

HEY, WE'RE IN A DIFFERENT ROOM THAN BEFORE.
AND KURO-CHAN ISN'T HERE!
IT'S YOUR FAULT.
WE WERE BANISHED FROM THAT PICTURE BECAUSE OF THE FUSS YOU CAUSED.

I KNEW IT.
SHE'S PLANNING TO COVER ALL THE MIRRORS IN THE MANSION.
...AND BLOCK THE WAY BETWEEN THIS WORLD AND THAT WORLD.

SOME-ONE'S COME IN.
THAT'S
IT'S NIJU-KU!


IT'S NO USE. WE'RE INSIDE A PICTURE.
THEY WON'T HEAR YOU SHOUT-ING.
KURO-CHAN!! SEN!!
THUD
THUD

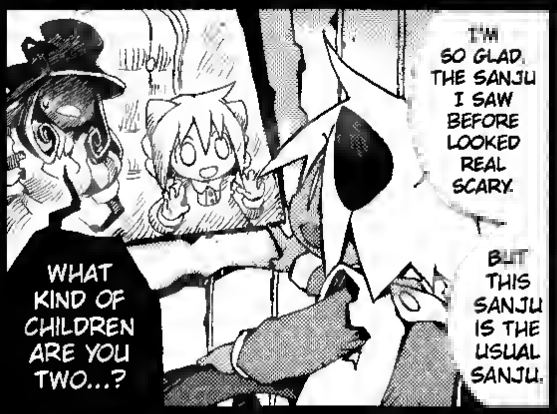

I TOLD YOU BEFORE.
NO MATTER HOW MUCH YOU SCREAM ...
NIJUKU! NIJUKU! NIJUKU!

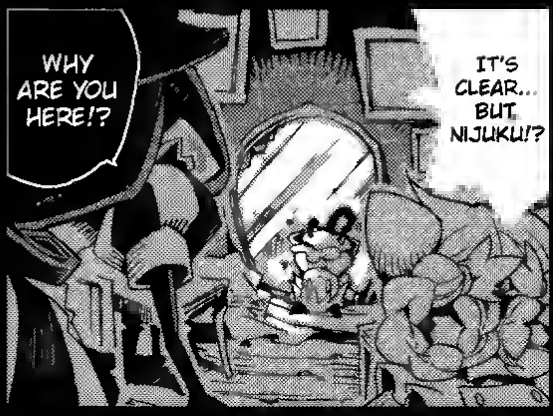
HEY, STOP IT!!
THE PAINTING WILL BE RUINED!!
THEN I'M GONNA GET OUT FROM HERE!
IF I JUST MAKE A HOLE, I CAN GO TO THE OTHER SIDE!!

EH!? SHE NOTICED !?
SANJU?
IS THAT YOU!?

YOU'RE RIGHT. IT'S A PRETTY VIOLENT SCENE.
But look, there's a historical painting too.
I thought there were only portraits here.

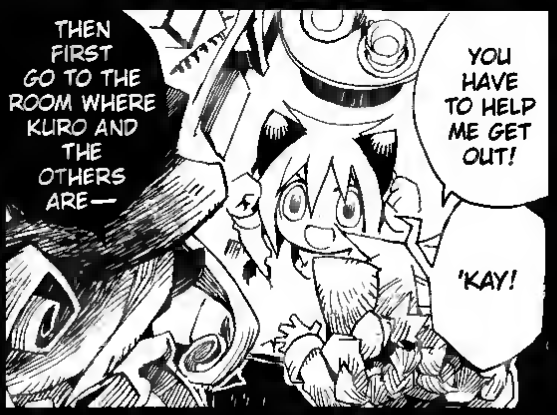
OKAY, IF SHE GOT IT DONE...
...WE SHOULD BE ABLE TO SEE THROUGH THE MIRROR IN THAT ROOM!
YUP!

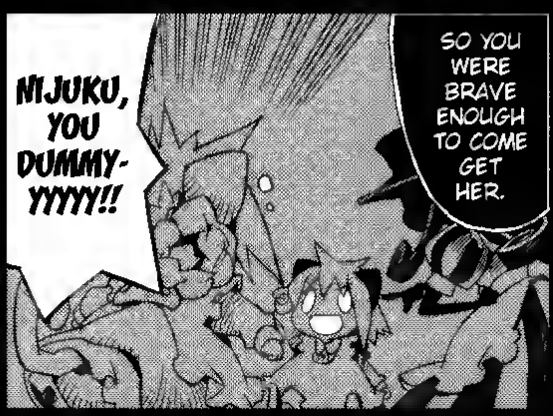

I'M SO GLAD THE SANJU I SAW BEFORE LOOKED REAL SCARY.
BUT THIS SANJU IS THE USUAL SANJU.
WHAT KIND OF CHILDREN ARE YOU TWO...?

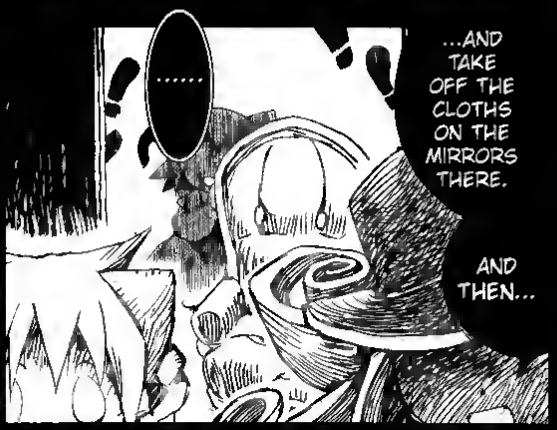

WHY ARE YOU HERE!?
IT'S CLEAR... BUT NIJUKU!?

BUT IT DOESN'T MATTER. THIS IS CONVE-NIENT.
YEAH! HEY, NIJUKU!
I'M STUCK OVER HERE!
WE HAVE AN ALLY ON THE OTHER SIDE.

THE OTHER ME SAID THAT I NEEDED TO COME TO THIS SIDE TO PULL YOU OUT!
WHEN I CLEARED THE MIRROR, I WAS HERE.


THEN FIRST GO TO THE ROOM WHERE KURO AND THE OTHERS ARE—
YOU HAVE TO HELP ME GET OUT!
'KAY!


NIJUKU, YOU DUMMY-YYYYY!!
SO YOU WERE BRAVE ENOUGH TO COME GET HER.


.....
...AND TAKE OFF THE CLOTHS ON THE MIRRORS THERE.
AND THEN...

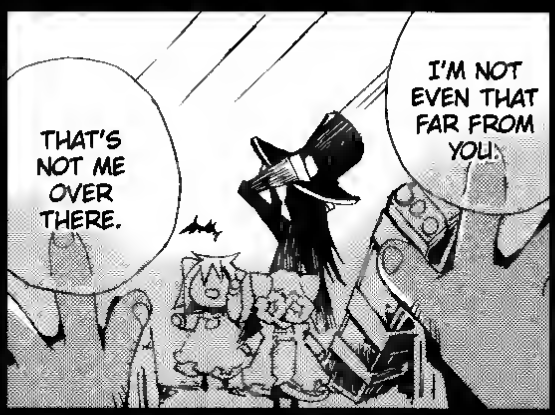
JUST NOW, I KINDA THOUGHT ...
...I HEARD SOME-THING.
.....?
WHAT'S WRONG, KURO-CHAN?

KURO-CHAN! IT'S NOT RAINING ANYMORE!
WHY ARE YOU IN SUCH A GOOD MOOD?
WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
OKAY, THEN. LET'S GO.
!!

...BUT GUESS NOT.
IT WAS PROBABLY MY IMAGI-NATION.
C'MON, KURO-CHA! LET'S GO ALREADY!
YOU'RE SO WEIRD, KURO-CHAN.

THUD
THIS ISN'T GOOD.
KURO-CHAN!!
SEN!!
KURO-CHAN!

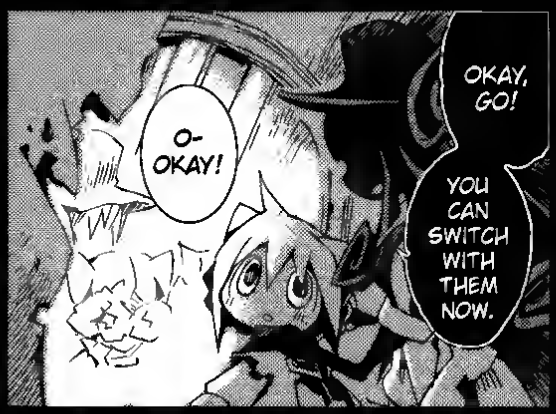
...H-Hey, Kuro.

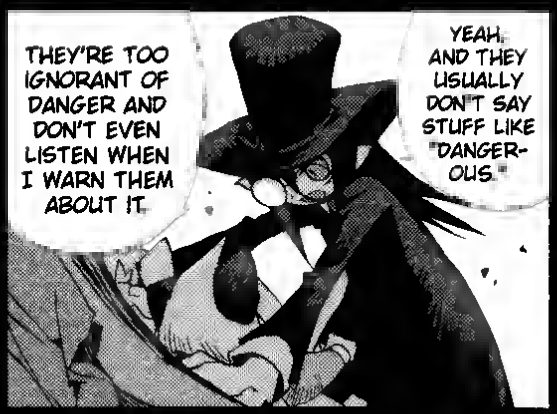

I'M NOT EVEN THAT FAR FROM YOU.
THAT'S NOT ME OVER THERE.

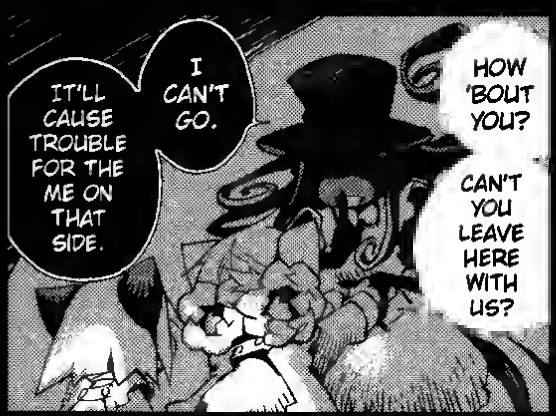
HUH?
Behind you...

WHY WON'T YOU LOOK THIS WAY...?

SANJU...
DON'T, KURO-CHAN!
YEAH! IT'S NOT SAFE TO GO NEAR IT!
THAT MIRROR'S DANGER-OUS!
NOT SAFE?
DAN-GER-OUS?
HEY, SANJU.
.....
!!
THE CUT FROM YESTER-DAY...
WASN'T IT ON YOUR RIGHT HAND?
.....
WHAT IS THIS ...?


O-OKAY!
OKAY, GO!
YOU CAN SWITCH WITH THEM NOW.


THEY'RE TOO IGNORANT OF DANGER AND DON'T EVEN LISTEN WHEN I WARN THEM ABOUT IT.
YEAH, AND THEY USUALLY DON'T SAY STUFF LIKE "DANGEROUS."


I CAN'T GO.
IT'LL CAUSE TROUBLE FOR THE ME ON THAT SIDE.
HOW 'BOUT YOU?
CAN'T YOU LEAVE HERE WITH US?

What's going on, Kuro?
I DON'T REALLY KNOW.
BUT THE DOUBTS I WAS HAVING JUST TURNED INTO CONVICTION.

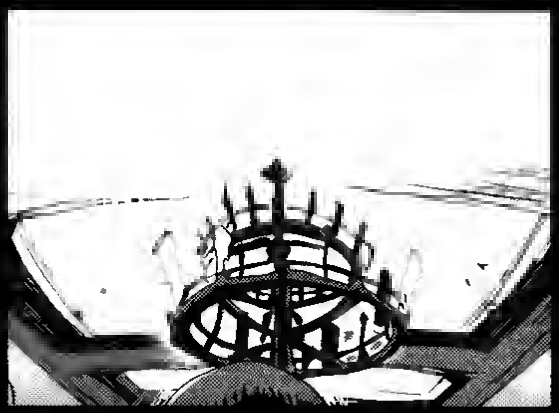
HOVE
BYE, SANJU.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT THESE TWO ARE, BUT...
...ONE THING'S FOR SURE...
THEY AREN'T OURS.

PLEASE TAKE CARE OF THE UNRELIABLE PERSON...
...ON THE OTHER SIDE FOR ME, OKAY?

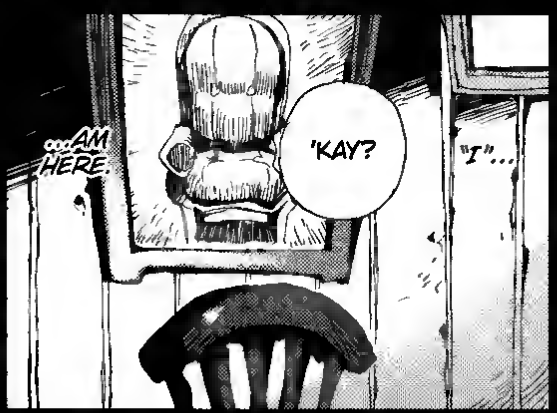
WHERE ARE...
...THE REAL NIJUKU AND SANJU...
...I KNOW!?

Hey.
So what was that all about?
I PROMISED TO KEEP IT SECRET.
CAN'T TELL YOU.



I'LL LET KURO-CHAN KNOW FROM NOW ON.
IT'S OKAY.
And in the end, Kuro still can't tell you guys apart.

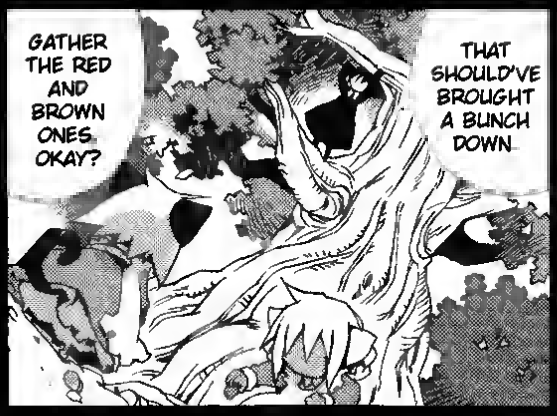
UNTIL YOU CAN TELL US APART...
...I'LL TELL YOU WHICH IS "ME."
...AS MANY TIMES AS IT TAKES.
I'LL TELL YOU...


...AM HERE.
'KAY?
"I"...

.....I GUESS.
...right?
The real pair...
UWAH! SANJU, DON'T BLOW YOUR NOSE ON ME!

HM?
WHAT'S THIS FEEL-ING?
YeaH...
SEN, CAN YOU DO IT TIGHTER?
WOBBLE
WOBBLE
NOW THAT I THINK ABOUT IT, I THINK I'VE FELT IT BEFORE...
BUT WHAT WAS IT AGAIN?
AWW, GEEZ.
SQUIRM
SQUIRM
Darn, forget it. I'm beat.
Sorry but I'm gonna Hit the sack early.
...SHE WOULD CLING TO ME AND WOULDN'T LET GO UNTIL I TURNED BACK.
WHEN WE FIRST BEGAN OUR JOURNEY, EVERY TIME "THIS DAY" CAME...

YOU GOT EXACTLY TWO BASKETS WORTH. THANKS.
I'M SURPRISED YOU WERE ABLE TO COLLECT THIS MANY AT THIS TIME OF YEAR.
THANK YOU.


GATHER THE RED AND BROWN ONES, OKAY?
THAT SHOULD'VE BROUGHT A BUNCH DOWN.

I'VE NOTICED ALL THE STORES CLOSING EARLY...
YOU WERE JUST IN TIME TOO.
I WAS ABOUT TO CLOSE UP SHOP.

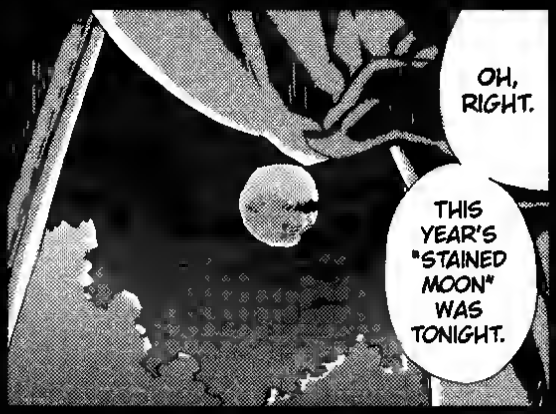
WE'VE BEEN SLEEPY THE WHOLE DAY TODAY.
I FEEL ALL BLEEEH.
HM? ARE YOU TWO MAYBE...

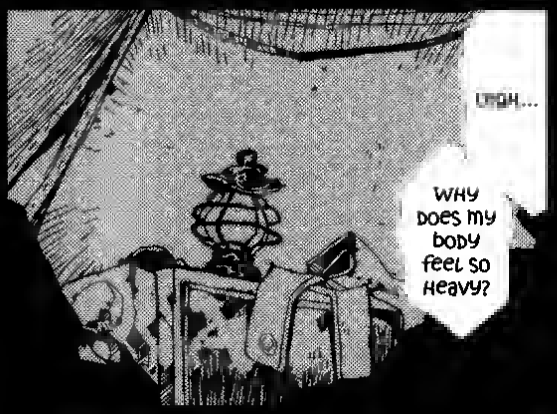
YES. TONIGHT IS THAT *NIGHT* WHICH COMES ONCE A YEAR
...RIGHT.

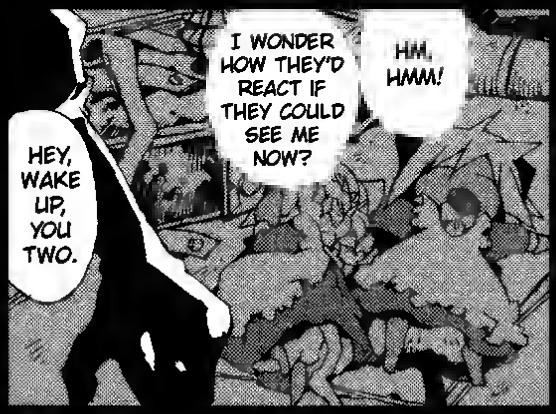
THE TENT'S UP, SO GO AHEAD TO BED.
YOU DON'T SEEM TO HAVE A FEVER...BUT THAT DOES WORRY ME A BIT.

I SEE.
IT'S THE NIGHT OF THE PURPLE-RED MOON.

YOU CAN USE AS MANY AS YOU LIKE FOR SHEETS AND BLANKETS.
KURO-CHAN...
DROP
DROP


OH, RIGHT.
THIS YEAR'S "STAINED MOON" WAS TONIGHT.

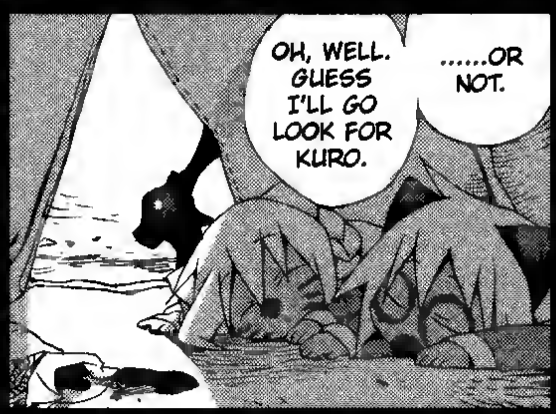

UHGH...
WHY DOES MY BODY FEEL SO HEAVY?


HEY, WAKE UP, YOU TWO.
I WONDER HOW THEY'D REACT IF THEY COULD SEE ME NOW?
HM, HMM!

Get off, would ya...?
OH, now I get it. These two are on top of me.

NIJUKU, SANJU. WAKE UPPP!
OOH, HAVING HANDS AGAIN IS CONVENIENT.

HRN!?


OH, WELL. GUESS I'LL GO LOOK FOR KURO.
.....OR NOT.

...I'VE GONE BACK...
...TO MY OLD SELF.

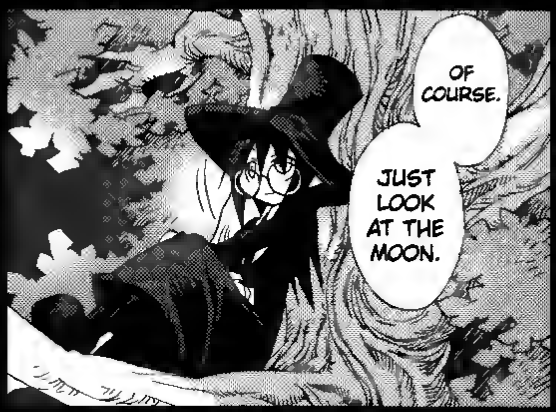
IF YOU KNEW, YOU SHOULD'VE COME TO SEE ME. IT'S BEEN A YEAR SINCE YOU'VE SEEN ME LIKE THIS.
BUT...
...YOU'RE THE SAME SEN INSIDE.

HEYYY, KURO.
THERE YOU ARE.

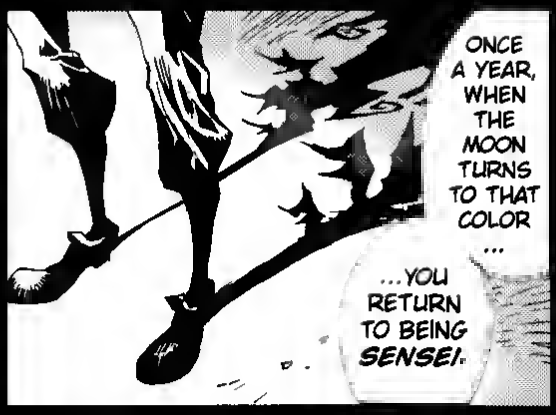
AND THIS YEAR...
...I WANTED TO GAZE AT THE MOON INSTEAD.
HAAAH... BEFORE I KNEW IT, YOU LOST THE CHARM OF AN INNOCENT CHILD.

OHH.
SO YOU DID RETURN TO YOUR OLD FORM.
WHAT, YOU KNEW?

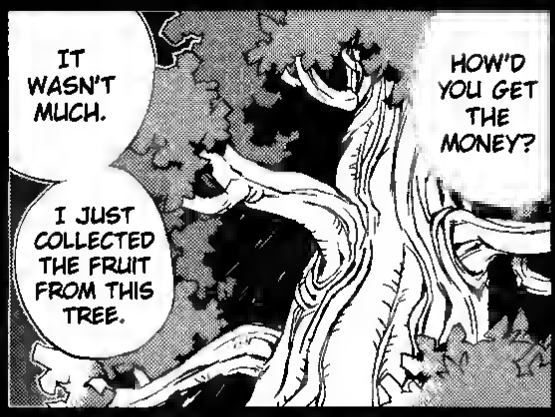
WOOSH
BONK
D'OW!!
WHEN WE STARTED OUT ON THIS TRIP EVERY TIME THIS DAY CAME...
...YOU USED TO HANG ON TO ME AND NEVER LET GO UNTIL I WENT BACK TO BEING A BA—


OF COURSE.
JUST LOOK AT THE MOON.

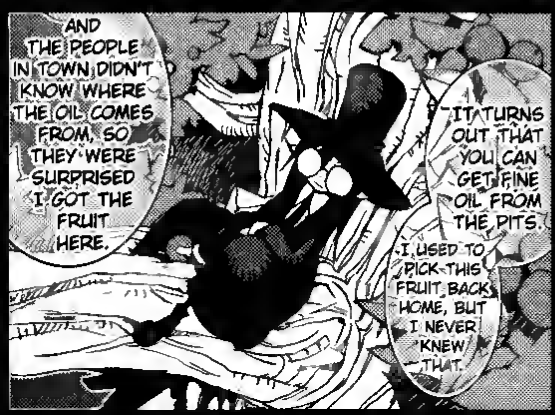
I HAD A LITTLE CASH SO I BOUGHT SOME FRUIT IN TOWN.
YOU CAN HAVE ONE.
GEE, THANKS.
YOU'RE SO THOUGHTFUL.
ROLL

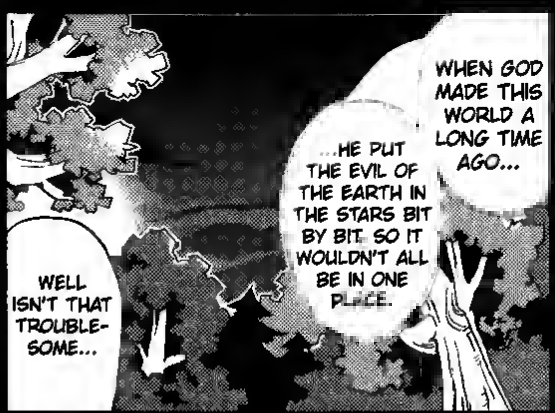

ONCE A YEAR, WHEN THE MOON TURNS TO THAT COLOR ...
...YOU RETURN TO BEING SENSEI.

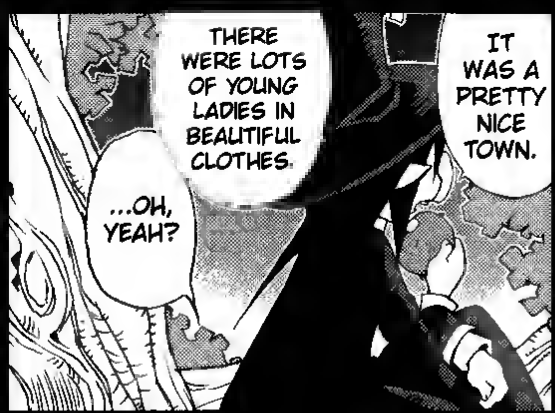
YOU FIGURED IT OUT?
ALL THE PLACES WE VISITED...
...NO ONE WAS EVER OUT ON THIS NIGHT.

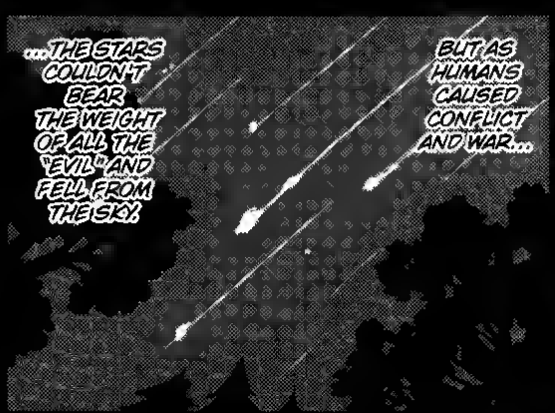

HOW'D YOU GET THE MONEY?
IT WASN'T MUCH.
I JUST COLLECTED THE FRUIT FROM THIS TREE.

THEY CALL IT A BAD OMEN OR THE DEVIL'S BIRTH-DAY...
YEAH.
THE TALES AROUND THIS TOWN WERE INTER-ESTING TOO.
THE NAMES AND THE FOLKLORE ABOUT IT DIFFER DEPENDING ON THE REGION. BUT...


AND THE PEOPLE IN TOWN DIDN'T KNOW WHERE THE OIL COMES FROM, SO THEY WERE SURPRISED I GOT THE FRUIT HERE.
IT TURNS OUT THAT YOU CAN GET FINE OIL FROM THE PITS.
I USED TO PICK THIS FRUIT BACK HOME, BUT I NEVER KNEW THAT.


WHEN GOD MADE THIS WORLD A LONG TIME AGO...
...HE PUT THE EVIL OF THE EARTH IN THE STARS BIT BY BIT SO IT WOULDN'T ALL BE IN ONE PLACE.
WELL ISN'T THAT TROUBLE-SOME...


IT WAS A PRETTY NICE TOWN.
THERE WERE LOTS OF YOUNG LADIES IN BEAUTIFUL CLOTHES.
...OH, YEAH?


...THE STARS COULDN'T BEAR THE WEIGHT OF ALL THE "EVIL" AND FELL FROM THE SKY.
BUT AS HUMANS CAUSED CONFLICT AND WAR...

YOU LITTLE— IS THIS PAY-BACK FOR ALL THOSE OTHER TIMES!?
YOU KNOW THAT THEY'RE ALL CLOSED FOR TONIGHT!!
YEAH. OH, AND THERE WERE BIG BARS AND PUBS TOO, SENSEI.

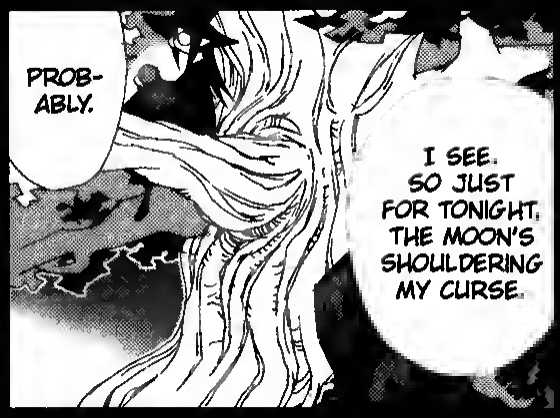
BUT TO ME...
...IT LOOKS LIKE YOU'RE REJECTING THE MOON'S OFFER AND TAKING ON THE WEIGHT YOURSELF.
WHO KNOWS?

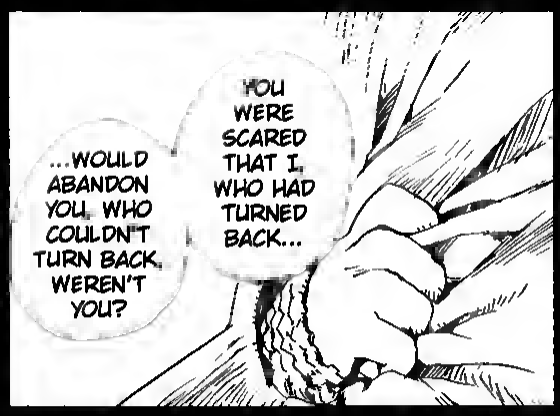
...AND VOLUNTEERED TO ABSORB THE EVIL ONCE A YEAR.
THE KINDLY MOON KNEW SHE HAD TO DO SOMETHING...

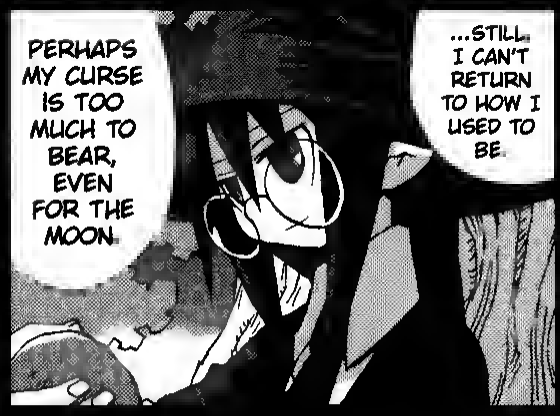
YOU WANNA HEAR WHAT I THINK ABOUT YOU CLINGING TO ME...
...BACK THEN?
SAY, KURO.

THE PEOPLE IN THIS REGION STAY INSIDE QUIETLY TO AVOID ADDING TO THE MOON'S BURDEN.
THAT'S WHY THE MOON TAKES IN ALL THE BAD AND GETS SICK ON THIS NIGHT.

YOU WEREN'T HAPPY TO SEE MY OLD SELF.

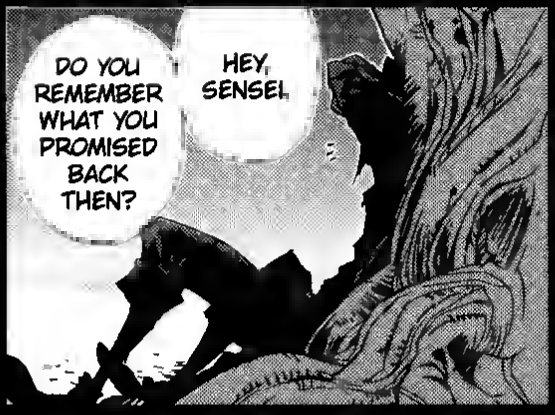

PROBABLY.
I SEE. SO JUST FOR TONIGHT, THE MOON'S SHOULDERING MY CURSE.

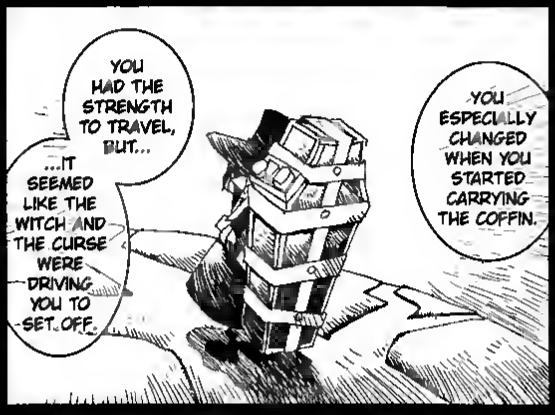

...WOULD ABANDON YOU, WHO COULDN'T TURN BACK, WEREN'T YOU?
YOU WERE SCARED THAT I, WHO HAD TURNED BACK...


PERHAPS MY CURSE IS TOO MUCH TO BEAR, EVEN FOR THE MOON.
...STILL, I CAN'T RETURN TO HOW I USED TO BE.

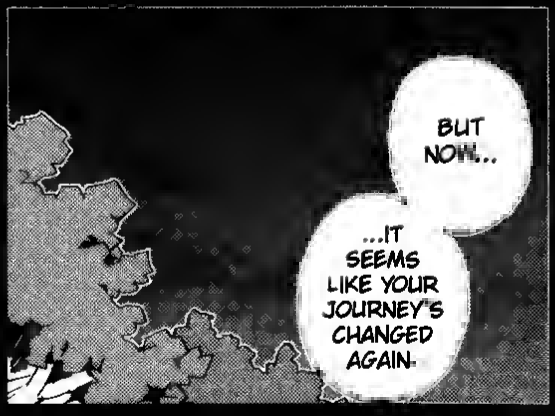
GETTING NEGLECTED LIKE I WAS TODAY MAKES ME SAD AS YOUR SURROGATE PARENT.
BUT I WISH YOU'D RELY ON ME SOME-TIMES TOO.

YOU WERE SMALL AND COULD ONLY RELY ON
BUT YOU'D ALWAYS BE FRIGHTENED WHEN YOU WERE LEFT BY YOUR SELF.
COS OUR ONLY BOND AT THE TIME WAS GETTING BACK OUR FORMS.

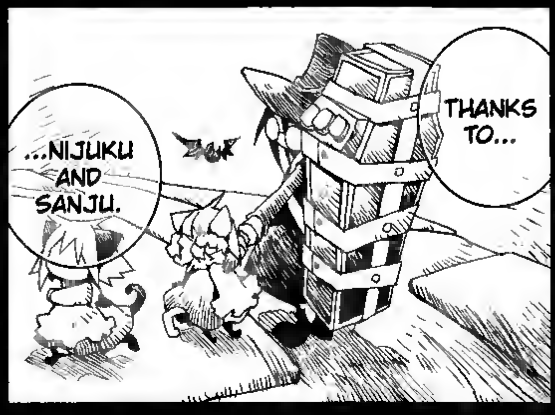

HEY, SENSEI.
DO YOU REMEMBER WHAT YOU PROMISED BACK THEN?


YOU HAD THE STRENGTH TO TRAVEL, BUT...
...IT SEEMED LIKE THE WITCH AND THE CURSE WERE DRIVING YOU TO SET OFF.
YOU ESPECIALLY CHANGED WHEN YOU STARTED CARRYING THE COFFIN.

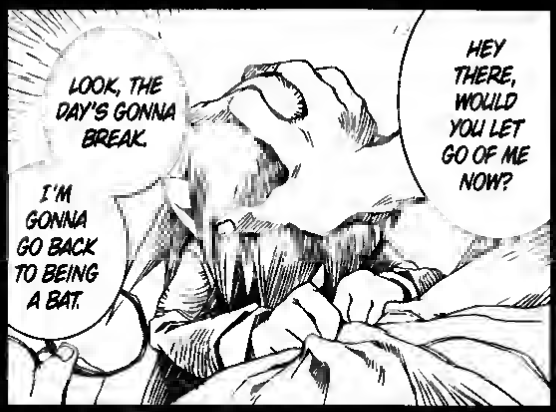
...YEAH. I REMEMBER.
I DON'T REMEMBER PROMISING, BUT...

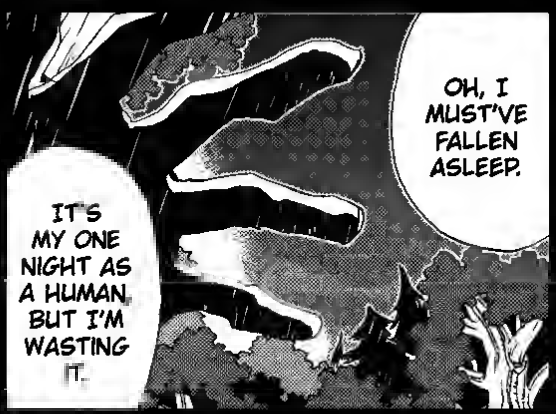

BUT NOW...
...IT SEEMS LIKE YOUR JOURNEY'S CHANGED AGAIN.

OKAY.
THAT'S FINE, THEN.

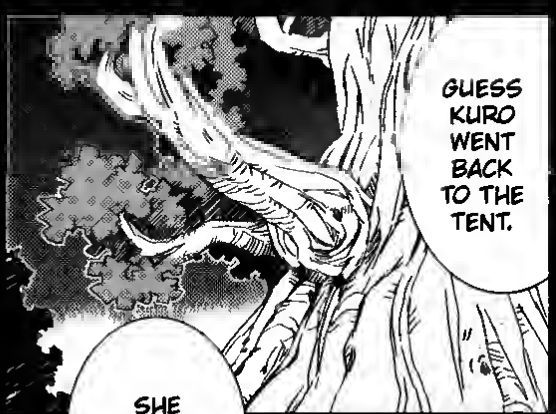

THANKS TO...
...NIJUKU AND SANJU.

.....
HM?


HEY THERE, WOULD YOU LET GO OF ME NOW?
LOOK, THE DAY'S GONNA BREAK.
I'M GONNA GO BACK TO BEING A BAT.


OH, I MUST'VE FALLEN ASLEEP.
IT'S MY ONE NIGHT AS A HUMAN, BUT I'M WASTING IT.

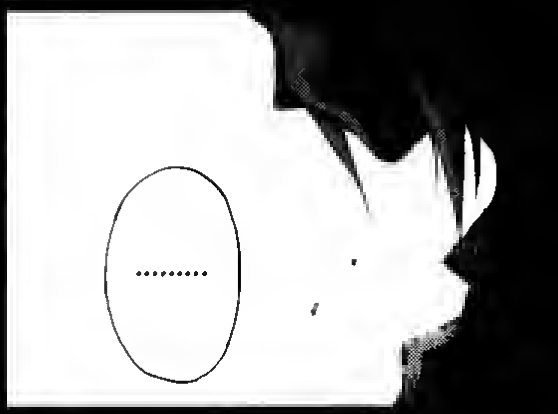
...THEN CAN YOU PROMISE ME SOMETHING?
IF YOU DO, I'LL LET GO.
WHAT IS IT?


GUESS KURO WENT BACK TO THE TENT.
SHE CAN BE SO COLD...

SENSEI, IF ONE DAY...
...THE BLACK THING COVERS ME UP AND TAKES ME OVER..
...AND I REALLY BECOME "SOMETHING ELSE"...

...WOULD YOU.....

SO HUNGRY.
MRMM!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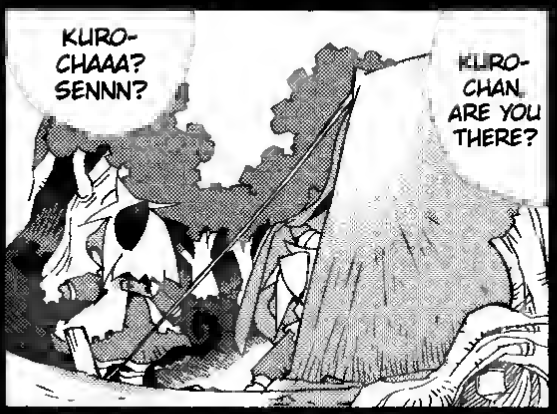

KURO-CHAAA? SENNN?
KURO-CHAN, ARE YOU THERE?

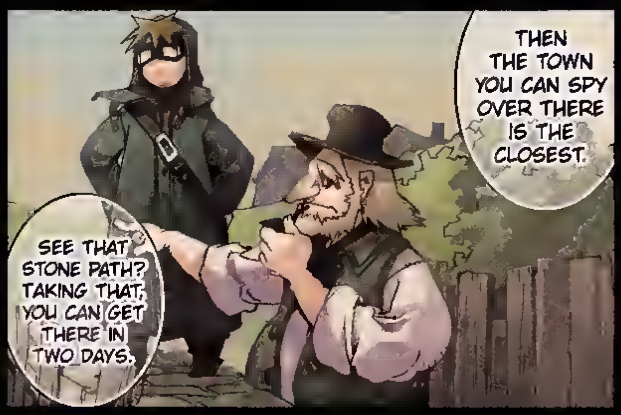
NIJUKU...
Sanju.

...HMM.
MIGHT AS WELL LET HER STAY LIKE THIS.

FLAP
FLAP
?
...H-HELP!

IT'LL...
...BE DAWN SOON.

THAT'S WHAT SHE THOUGHT AT FIRST.
WHAT CURIOUS MAGIC.
TO BE ABLE TO CHANGE SHAPE INTO ANY-THING...
...SHE REALIZED SOMETHING.
BUT AS SHE CONTINUED HER TRAVELS...
AND THAT "POISON" WAS SLOWLY EATING AWAY AT HER BODY.
...WERE "POISON" TO HER NOW.
HER HUMAN EMOTIONS ...
...THAT THIS WAS MOST DEFINITELY A "CURSE."
THAT'S HOW SHE KNEW...


THEN THE TOWN YOU CAN SPY OVER THERE IS THE CLOSEST.
SEE THAT STONE PATH? TAKING THAT, YOU CAN GET THERE IN TWO DAYS.

I SEE. YOU WANT TO GO TO THE CITY?
WELL, I CAN'T MAKE MONEY DEALING WITH HORSES AND CHICKENS.

What's wrong, Kuro?
NAH...

...YOU'RE BETTER OFF TAKING THE LONG WAY THAN GOING NEAR THOSE WOODS.
THERE IS, BUT...
IT LOOKS LIKE A CRAZY DETOUR.
ISN'T THERE A SHORTCUT THROUGH THE WOODS?

YEP!
But you're marking our route, right?

THE MOSS IS GROWING IN IRREGULAR PLACES, AND I CAN'T TELL THE DIRECTION WE'RE GOING.
I JUST THOUGHT THE TREES HERE ARE WEIRD.

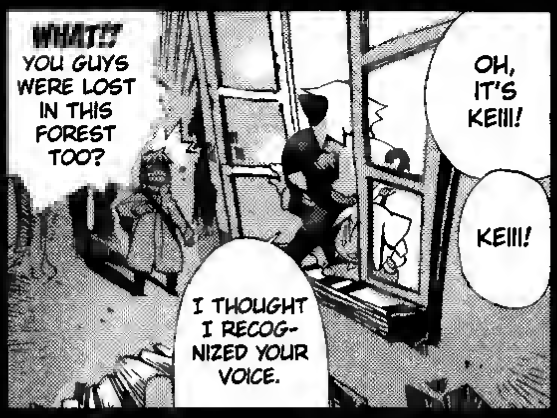
Already there...!?
HMM...

BUT THE TREES BEAT US TO IT SOME-TIMES.
WHEN WE GO TO MAKE A MARK, IT'S ALREADY THERE.

THIS FOREST CONFUSES PEOPLE...
...AND ONCE YOU WALK IN, YOU CAN'T GET OUT.
I GUESS WHAT THE VILLAGERS SAID WAS TRUE.

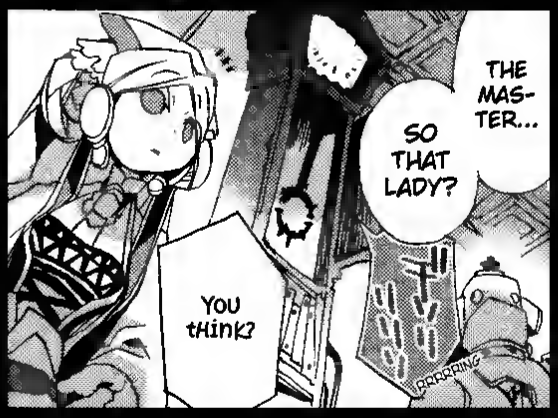
SPIN
THE DAY WAS CLEAR, AND THE ROAD WAS SMOOTH, SO I THOUGHT I'D BE FINE, BUT...
...NOW I SEE. IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE I'LL MAKE IT OUT ANYTIME SOON.
SPIN
THERE'S A HOUSE...
...THIS DEEP IN THE FOREST?
THE BIG TREES ARE GETTING IN THE WAY, AND I CAN'T SEE THE SKY.
ISN'T THERE ANYTHING THAT'LL HELP ME TELL THE DIRECTION ...?
OH! I'M NOT ANYONE SUSPI-CIOUS.
BEAM
I WAS LOST IN THE WOODS, AND THE LIGHT LED ME HERE.
NN?
WAS THERE A FIRST-MAGNITUDE STAR THAT LOW?

KYAAAH!
KYAAAH!
VRROOOO

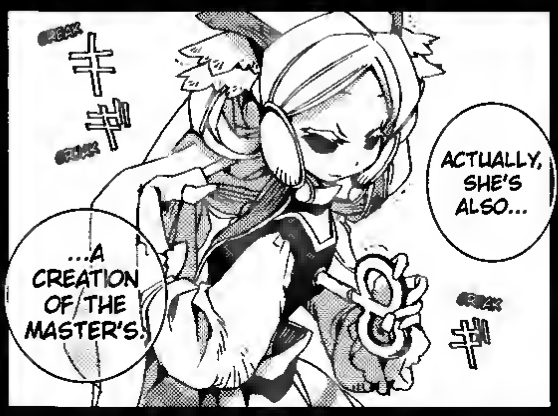

WHAT!?
YOU GUYS WERE LOST IN THIS FOREST TOO?
OH, IT'S KEIII!
KEIII!
I THOUGHT I RECOGNIZED YOUR VOICE.

WE'RE NOT SURE.
THE MASTER OF THIS HOUSE MADE IT.
WHAT IS THAT?
OH, THEY GOT CAUGHT AGAIN.

I'LL BET YOU WANTED TO TAKE A SHORTCUT TO SAVE ON GAS, RIGHT?
IT'S DIFFERENT FROM YOUR REASON FOR BEING HERE.
WE CAME HERE 'COS WE WERE INTERESTED IN THE RUMORS ABOUT THESE WOODS.
URGH...


THE MASTER...
SO THAT LADY?
YOU THINK?
SCRRRING

HUH? UH, YEAH.
Are you a friend ...
...of theirs?


CRICK
CRICK
ACTUALLY, SHE'S ALSO...
...A CREATION OF THE MASTER'S.

HEY, HEY! DON'T BE SO COLD!!
WE'RE ACQUAINTED WITH HIM AGAINST OUR WILLS.
HE PERSISTENTLY PEDDLES VULGAR SONGS TO GET YOUR MONEY.
DON'T GET INVOLVED WITH HIM.

I only know how to make them.
I am not sure.
THIS IS SO PRETTY!
COULD IT BE A TEXTILE FROM THIS REGION?
DON'T PULL ON IT
YEAH.
A DOLL!?
SHE IS!?
...make my own clothes...
...keep the house lit and wait for my master to come home.
My job...
...is to wind my spring twice a day...
.....
You're right. She's friendlier than some humans I know.
SHE TALKS, LAUGHS...
WOW... SHE DOESN'T LOOK LIKE IT.
IS THIS YOUR MASTER?
Yes.
His name is Professor Rossum.
OH, THANK YOU.
My master is out.
And I do not know how to entertain guests, but...
WHAT'S WITH YOU? YOU'RE SHAKING.
So there was an inventor lurking in these woods...
I'VE NEVER HEARD OF HIM EITHER.
I'VE NEVER SEEN HIM
I WISH some girl I know would learn a thing or two about being ladylike
Yeah, I guess.
...IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE I TALKED TO A WOMAN, SO I'M KINDA NERVOUS.
WELL, EVEN THOUGH I KNOW SHE'S A DOLL...
THIS IS WATER
IT'S DIFFERENT IF I'M WORKING.

WHAT'RE THESE, KURO-CHAN?
WHAT IS IT?
OH.

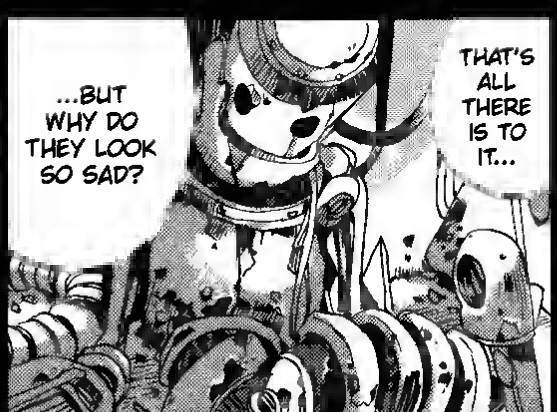
YEAH, YOU'RE RIGHT.
I THINK HE'D BE AN OLD MAN BY NOW.
BUT THIS PICTURE LOOKS PRETTY OLD.

HER FRIENDS, MOST LIKELY.
THOUGH...
...THEY AREN'T MOVING ANY-MORE.

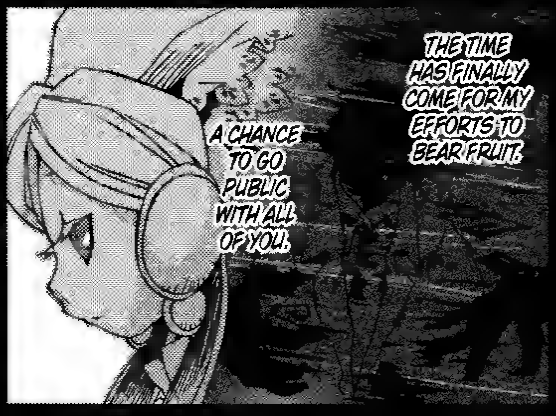
I have not counted the days.
DON'T SAY THAT.
HE MIGHT BE DEAD IN THE WOODS.
WHEN DID YOUR master take off?
CLAK
CLAK

EITHER THEY BROKE, OR THEIR POWER SUPPLY RAN OUT.
OR MAYBE THEY WERE LIKE THIS TO BEGIN WITH.
THEY USED TO MOVE?
HOW COME THEY DON'T MOVE NOW?

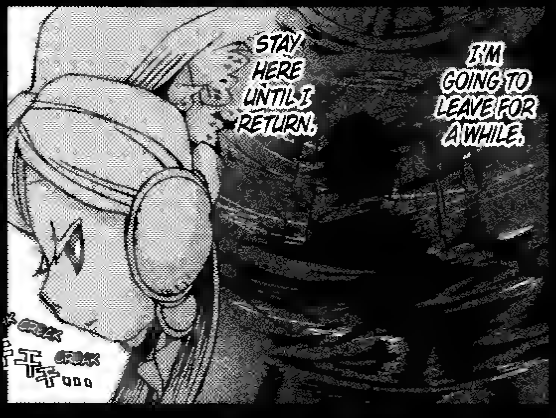
58,018TH TIME...
But to go by the windings of my spring ever since his depar-ture...
...the last one was my 58,018th time.
ガチ
CLAK
SO roughly eighty years!?


...BUT WHY DO THEY LOOK SO SAD?
THAT'S ALL THERE IS TO IT...

.....
Yeah. He probably won't be coming back...
THAT MEANS ...

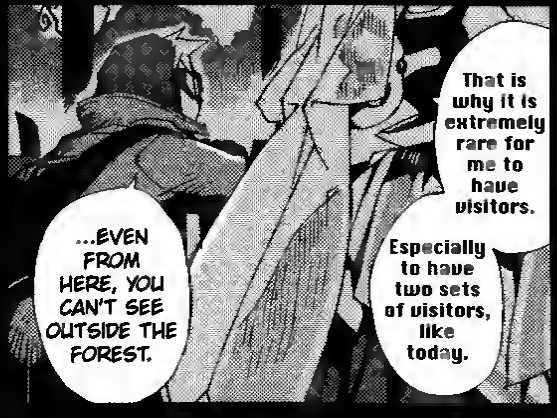

THE TIME HAS FINALLY COME FOR MY EFFORTS TO BEAR FRUIT.
A CHANCE TO GO PUBLIC WITH ALL OF YOU.

YOU'RE RIGHT. THE TREES ARE MOVING A LITTLE.
Look beyond the light over there.


I'M GOING TO LEAVE FOR A WHILE.
STAY HERE UNTIL I RETURN.
CREAK
CREAK

SO YOUR MASTER MADE THESE WOODS TO KEEP PEOPLE OUT.
AND THAT'S HOW THE PEOPLE WHO COME IN GET LOST.
Yes.

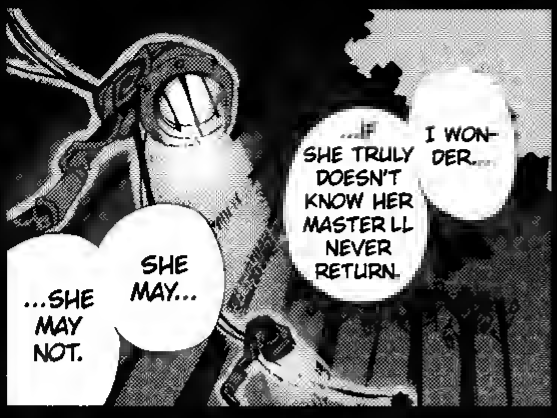
DO YOU STILL BELIEVE...
...THAT YOUR MASTER'S GOING TO RETURN?


That is why it is extremely rare for me to have visitors.
Especially to have two sets of visitors, like today.
...EVEN FROM HERE, YOU CAN'T SEE OUTSIDE THE FOREST.

Yes.

I was only left here to watch over the house.
I do not know.
I WONDER WHAT MADE YOUR MASTER LEAVE FOR EIGHTY YEARS.

KEI?
KERTLINK
ガコン
WHIRRRR
ウィィィィ
WHY DON'T YOU COME WITH US?
LEAVE THIS HOUSE.
I see. This way, we won't get lost.
Please follow these lights to the exit.
...THAN TO WAIT FOR HIM? HE MAY NEVER COME.
ISN'T IT BETTER TO GO LOOK FOR YOUR MASTER...
Be careful.
THANKS FOR THE HOSPITALITY.
TAKE CARE... IF THAT'S THE THING TO SAY HERE.
...PAST THIS FOREST, RIGHT?
YOU'VE NEVER SEEN THE WORLD...
.....
OF COURSE.
...please tell him I am still waiting
If you see my master...


I WONDER...
...IF SHE TRULY DOESN'T KNOW HER MASTER LL NEVER RETURN.
SHE MAY...
...SHE MAY NOT.

.....
I cannot do that.

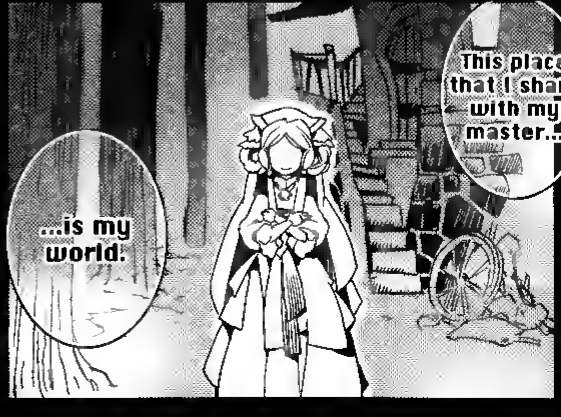
Don't feel so down. SHE's a DOLL.
THERE ARE BETTER WOMEN OUT THERE FOR YOU.
THAT'S NOT IT.
I JUST CAN'T UNDERSTAND IT.

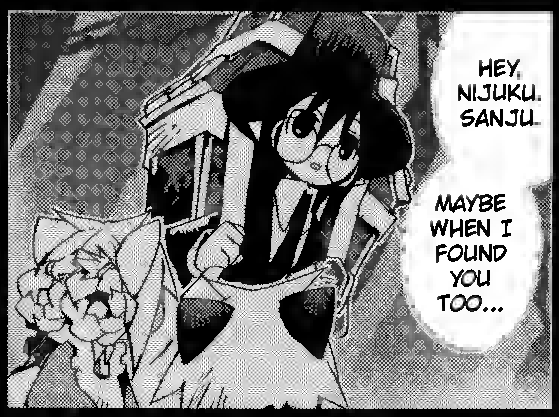
I was asked to watch over the house.
I must stay here.
BUT...
...YOU MIGHT BE WAITING FOREVER.

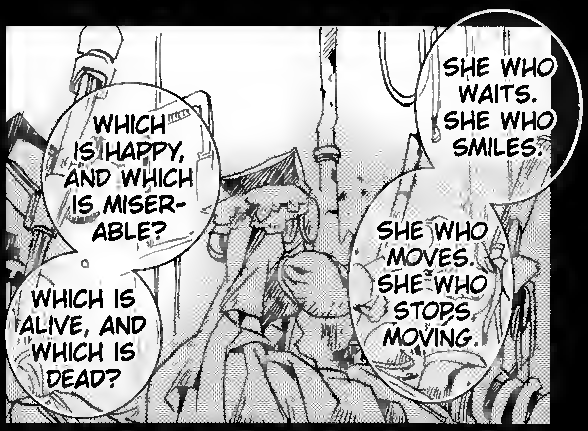
SHE'S GONNA WAIT FOR HER MASTER...
...UNTIL SHE STOPS MOVING.

I cannot abandon the tasks I have been given.
And knowing the outside world is no concern of mine.

I'M SURE THE OLD MAN DIDN'T MAKE HER JUST TO ROT.
IS SHE REALLY HAPPY LIKE THAT?
HMM.


This place that I share with my master...
...is my world.


HEY, NIJUKU. SANJU.
MAYBE WHEN I FOUND YOU TOO...

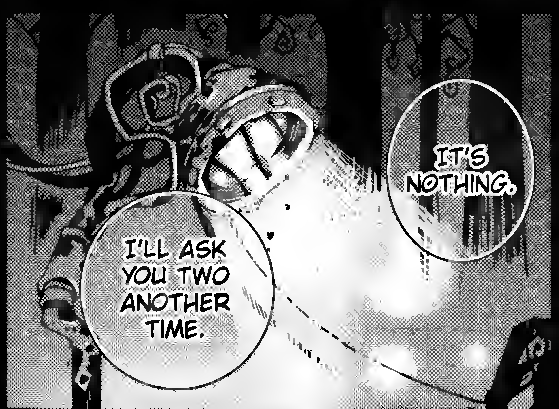

SHE WHO WAITS. SHE WHO SMILES.
WHICH IS HAPPY, AND WHICH IS MISERABLE?
SHE WHO MOVES. SHE WHO STOPS MOVING.
WHICH IS ALIVE, AND WHICH IS DEAD?

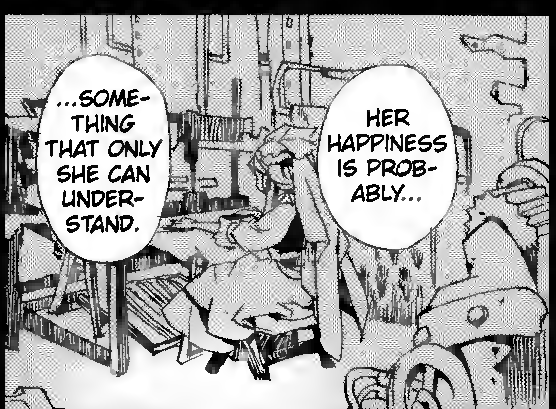
WHAT, KURO-CHAN?
WHAT'S WRONG, KURO-CHA?

THAT'S NOT HER STANDARD...
...BUT RATHER OURS, WHO OBSERVE HER.

.....
OH.

JUST BECAUSE A HUMAN MADE HER...
...DOESN'T MEAN SHE'D HAVE THE SAME STANDARDS AS A HUMAN.


IT'S NOTHING.
I'LL ASK YOU TWO ANOTHER TIME.


...SOMETHING THAT ONLY SHE CAN UNDERSTAND.
HER HAPPINESS IS PROBABLY...

YEAH, I HEAR THAT FOREST IS BAD NEWS.
IT'S DARK FROM MORNING TILL NIGHT.
AND THERE'S NOTHING TO HELP YOU FIND YOUR WAY.

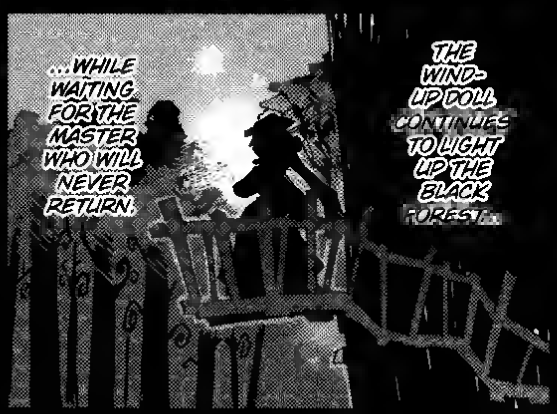
WE'RE HERE.
HERE!
THANK YOU.

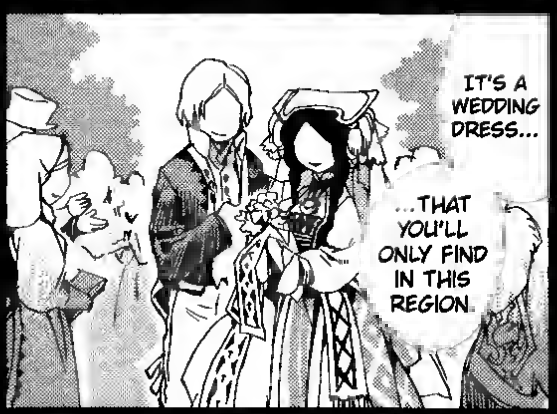
BUT SOMETIMES...
...AND WILL FIND A LOST TRAVELER AND LIGHT HIS WAY OUT.
...A STAR FALLS UPON THE FOREST...

WELCOME TRAVELERS!
THERE'S A WEDDING TODAY.
PLEASE COME CELEBRATE WITH US.

WELL, IT'S ONE OF THE RUMORS.
WHAT THE HECK? THAT'S THE WEIRDEST STORY I'VE HEARD SO FAR.

OH.
THAT'S...
ISN'T IT LOVELY?

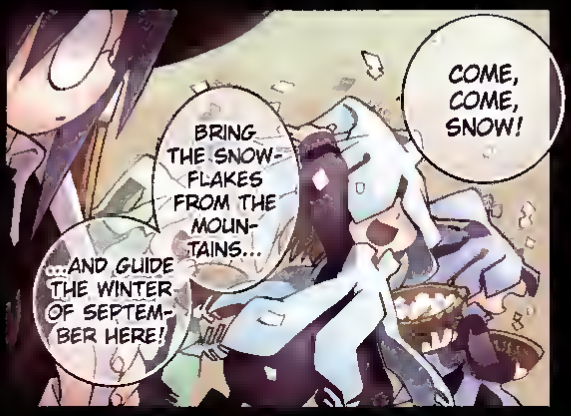

...WHILE WAITING FOR THE MASTER WHO WILL NEVER RETURN.
THE WIND-UP DOLL CONTINUES TO LIGHT UP THE BLACK FOREST...


IT'S A WEDDING DRESS...
...THAT YOU'LL ONLY FIND IN THIS REGION.

It's nice to have a clear view of the sky.
WE'VE MADE IT OUT OF THE WOODS AT LAST.
SO THAT WOULD BE THE ROAD ON THE LEFT.
When at a fork in the road, follow the sun.
WHICH ONE DO WE TAKE?
KURO-CHAN, THERE ARE TWO ROADS.
BYYYE!
BYE, KEIII!
SEE YA, GUYS.
MAYBE WE'LL MEET AGAIN.
VROOM
WHY THIS WAY?
HUH?

Shoulder-a-Coffin Kuro by Satoko Kiyuduki

In the end, the child didn't really understand it.
But she gazed intently for a long, long time at the place
where she was said to have been born with the person
who was said to have created her.


COME, COME, SNOW!
BRING THE SNOW-FLAKES FROM THE MOUN-TAINS...
...AND GUIDE THE WINTER OF SEPTEM-BER HERE!

HERE!
HERE?
WE'RE HERE.

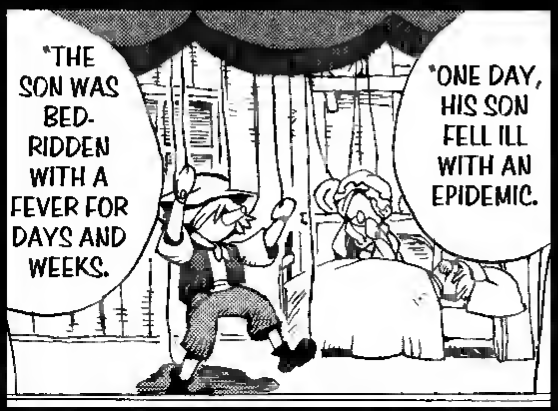
Asking for snow during Harvest? How impatient.
WHAT AN ODD SONG.
?

During a festival, they're more forgiving of outsiders in their midst.
That's a good thing.
...THAT THIS VILLAGE IS IN THE MIDDLE OF A HARVEST FESTIVAL.
I HEARD ON THE WAY...

WELL, WHEN WE GOT TO THIS VILLAGE, I HAD A FEELING THAT SOMETHING DIDN'T BELONG.
THERE WAS WHITE CLOTH HERE AND THERE ON EVERY-THING.
I GUESS I TOOK IT TO BE SNOWY SCENERY FOR A SECOND.

"THIS IS A STORY ABOUT A MAN NAMED IAN...
"...WHO LIVED IN THIS VILLAGE.

"COME, COME, SNOW" IS...
...A SONG ASKING FOR A GOOD HARVEST IN THIS VILLAGE.

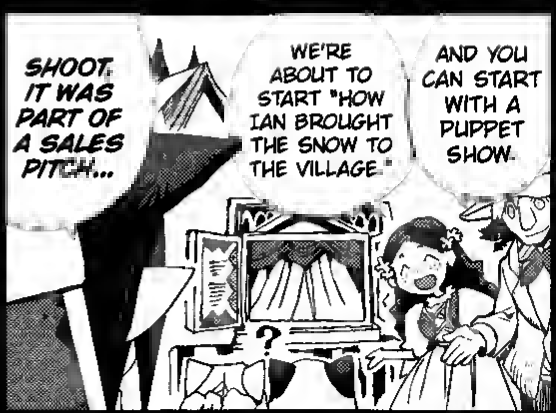

"ONE DAY, HIS SON FELL ILL WITH AN EPIDEMIC.
"THE SON WAS BED-RIDDEN WITH A FEVER FOR DAYS AND WEEKS.

IT'S LIKE A CHANT.
TO ASK FOR SNOW?
It doesn't make sense.

"MY DEAR SON, HOW ARE YOU FEELING?'
"THE SON LOOKED AT IAN AND REPLIED...

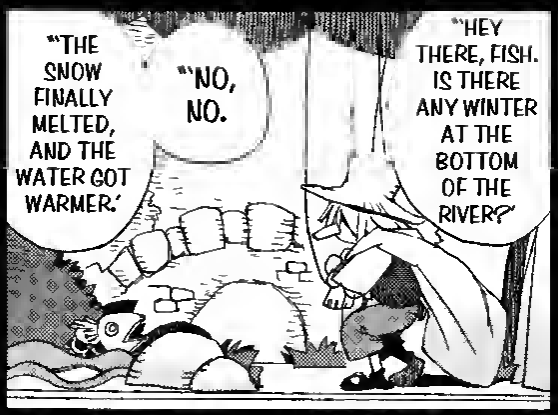
YES. IF YOU GO AROUND THE VILLAGE ONCE...
..YOU'LL FIGURE OUT WHAT KIND OF HARVEST FESTIVAL IT IS!
IT'S NOTHING TO PUZZLE OVER. TODAY IS THE HARVEST FESTIVAL.

"'DADDY, I WANT TO SEE SNOW.'
"'IS THE SNOW COMING SOON?'"

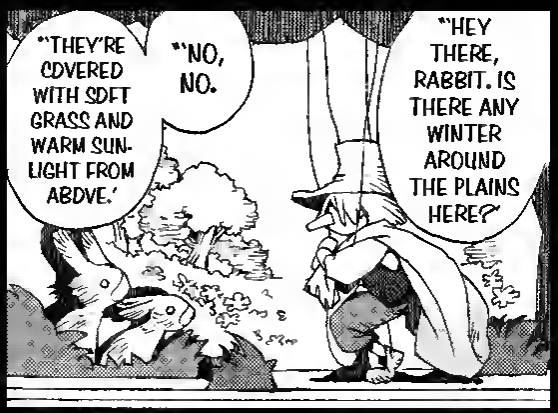

SHOOT. IT WAS PART OF A SALES PITCH...
WE'RE ABOUT TO START "HOW IAN BROUGHT THE SNOW TO THE VILLAGE."
AND YOU CAN START WITH A PUPPET SHOW.
?

"IAN LEFT THE VILLAGE CARRYING A LARGE SACK.
"I'M GOING TO FIND IT AND BRING IT HOME FOR MY BOY.'
"WINTER MUST BE HIDING AROUND HERE SOMEWHERE.

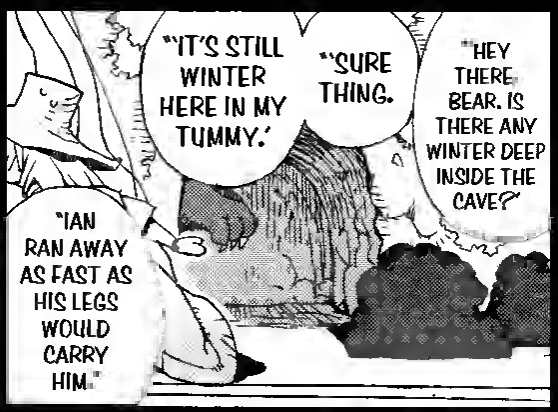
"IAN COULD NOT ANSWER.
LOOKS LIKE THEY'RE CAPTIVATED.
YEAH.
"IT WAS SPRING, AND ALL THE SNOW HAD MELTED.

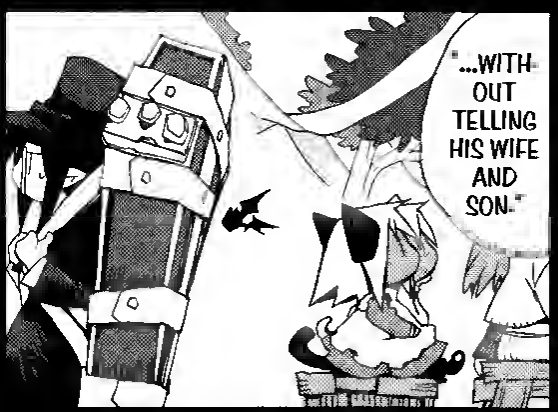

"HEY THERE, FISH. IS THERE ANY WINTER AT THE BOTTOM OF THE RIVER?'
"NO, NO.
"'THE SNOW FINALLY MELTED, AND THE WATER GOT WARMER.'

WHAT SHOULD I DO? I WANNA CHECK OUT THE VILLAGE.
THEY WON'T LEAVE UNTIL THIS PLAY'S DONE.
WE JUST NEED TO COME BACK BEFORE THAT.


"HEY THERE, RABBIT. IS THERE ANY WINTER AROUND THE PLAINS HERE?'
"NO, NO.
"'THEY'RE COVERED WITH SOFT GRASS AND WARM SUNLIGHT FROM ABOVE.'

"THAT WAS WHEN IAN DECIDED...
LET'S SNEAK AWAY
"...TO LEAVE ON A JOURNEY ..."

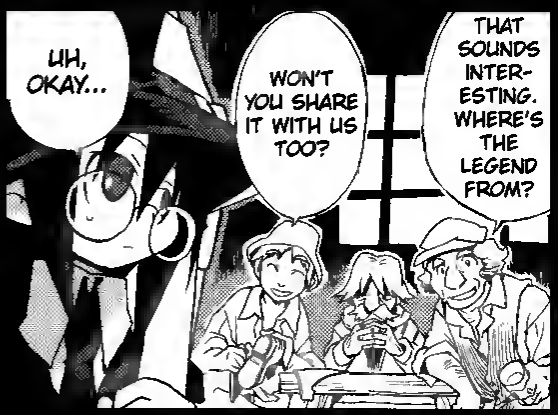

"HEY THERE BEAR. IS THERE ANY WINTER DEEP INSIDE THE CAVE?'
"SURE THING.
"'IT'S STILL WINTER HERE IN MY TUMMY.'
"IAN RAN AWAY AS FAST AS HIS LEGS WOULD CARRY HIM."


"...WITHOUT TELLING HIS WIFE AND SON."

"...SPRING WAS FADING AWAY, AND SUMMER WAS BEGINNING.
"AND WITH IAN STILL HAVING NO CLUES...

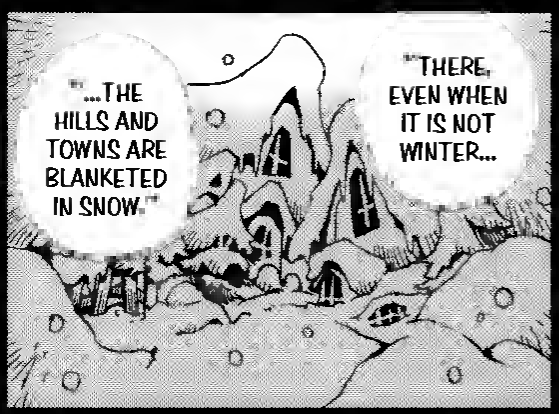
I SEE.
A WITCH THAT USES BLACK MAGIC?
NO, NEVER HEARD OF HER

"IAN WAS PRETTY TIRED FROM WALKING.
"HEY THERE, BIRD.
"I GUESS WINTER IS COMPLETELY GONE.'

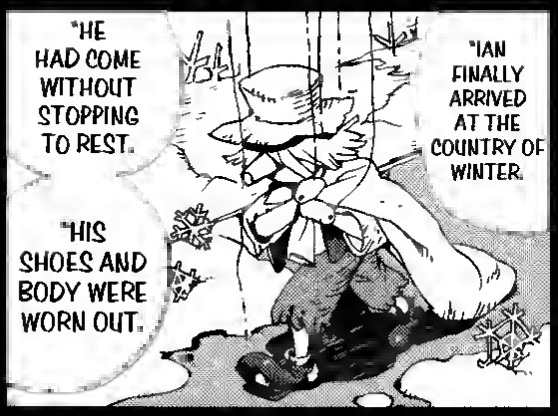

UH, OKAY...
WON'T YOU SHARE IT WITH US TOO?
THAT SOUNDS INTER-ESTING. WHERE'S THE LEGEND FROM?

"...BUT IF YOU CROSS TWO MOUN-TAINS...
"...I HAVE HEARD THERE IS A COUNTRY OF WINTER.'
"THEN THE BIRD REPLIED...
"WINTER IS HERE NO MORE...

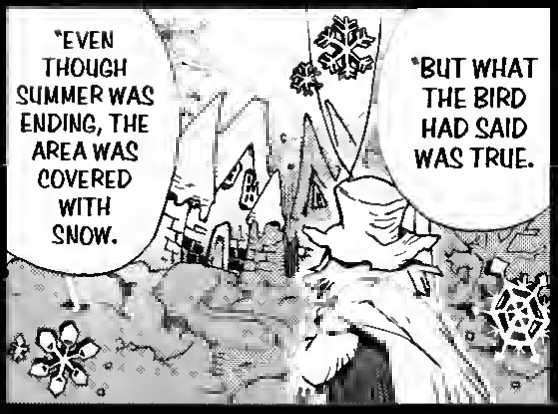
OH, GEEZ.
How about a story about a bat who got turned into a Human?
IF YOU RE A TRAVELER, YOU HAVE A LOT OF STORIES, RIGHT?
DON'T YOU HAVE ANYTHING TO ENTERTAIN US WITH?


"...THE HILLS AND TOWNS ARE BLANKETED IN SNOW."
"THERE, EVEN WHEN IT IS NOT WINTER...

...WHEN WILL I GET A REAL LEAD?
THIS IS A TALE...
...I'VE REPEATED WITHOUT EXPECTING MUCH BUT...

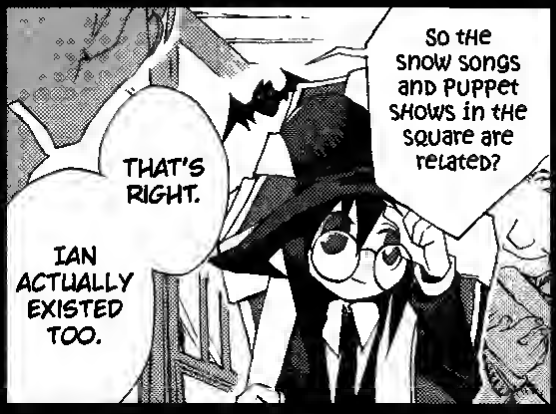

"HE HAD COME WITHOUT STOPPING TO REST.
"HIS SHOES AND BODY WERE WORN OUT.
"IAN FINALLY ARRIVED AT THE COUNTRY OF WINTER.

OUR COTTON FABRICS COULD SELL FOR HIGH PRICES EVEN IN THE CITY.
IF YOU DYED IT, IT WOULD TURN OUT VERY PRETTY.
WHAT DO YOU THINK? ISN'T IT PURE WHITE LIKE REAL SNOW?


"EVEN THOUGH SUMMER WAS ENDING, THE AREA WAS COVERED WITH SNOW.
"BUT WHAT THE BIRD HAD SAID WAS TRUE.

TODAY'S HARVEST FESTIVAL IS IN CELE-BRATION OF THAT TOO.
THAT'S RIGHT. THEY'RE A SPECIALTY OF THIS VILLAGE.
Cotton in this region? Not WOOL?

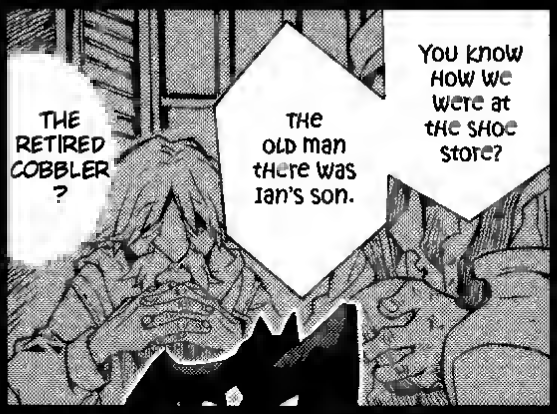
"'THE SNOW HERE NEVER MELTS AND WILL CONTINUE TO CRYSTALLIZE.'
"THE PEOPLE OF THE TOWN SAID...

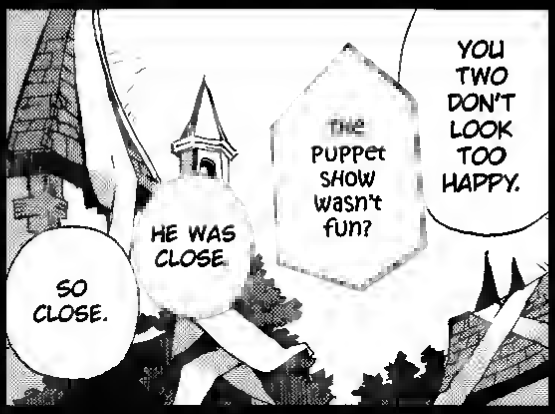

THAT'S RIGHT.
IAN ACTUALLY EXISTED TOO.
So the snow songs and puppet shows in the square are related?

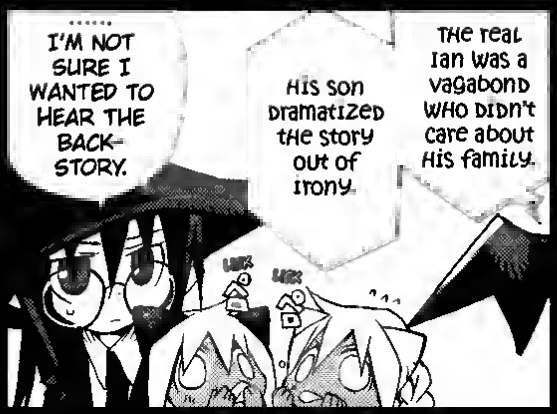
"...THEY GLADLY FILLED HIS SACK WITH 'SNOW DROPS.'"
"WHEN IAN TOLD THEM OF HIS SON'S WISH...

...HE BROUGHT THEM BACK ALONG WITH THE SNOW.
WELL, TO TELL YOU THE END OF THE STORY...

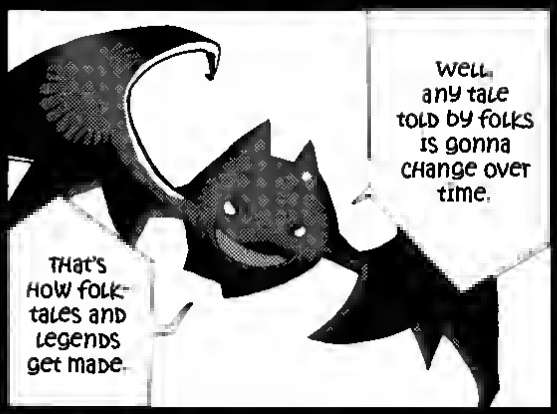
"WHEN IAN THOUGHT OF THAT, HIS BURDEN FELT LIGHTER.
"I CAN GO HOME TO MY WIFE AND SON AT LAST.'
"BUT IT WASN'T JUST IN HIS HEAD.
HERE, I GAVE YOU A LITTLE EXTRA.
SINCE IT'S THE FESTIVAL AND ALL.
THANK YOU.
"NOT A DROP OF SNOW WAS LEFT IN THE BAG.
"HIS SACK HAD GOTTEN A HOLE DURING HIS LENGTHY TRAVELS.
"AND THE SNOW DROPS FELL OUT.
MOTHER, A TRAVELER WOULDN'T UNDERSTAND.
"SNOW DROPS."
OH? WHAT'S THIS?
"IAN WAS AT HIS END, BOTH MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY.
"HE COULDN'T ENDURE THIS DESPAIR.
"'NO, IT CAN'T BE! ALL OF THIS FOR NOTHING.'
.....?
I HEARD YOU HAD CHILDREN WITH YOU.
I'M SURE THEY WILL COME IN HANDY.
THEY'RE JUST THE BITS LEFT AT THE BOTTOM OF THE CANDY JAR.
"AND HE FELL TO THE FLOOR, AS IF IN A DEAD SLEEP."
THE PUPPET SHOW IS GOING TO END SOON, YOU SEE?


You know how we were at the shoe store?
The old man there was Ian's son.
The retired cobbler?

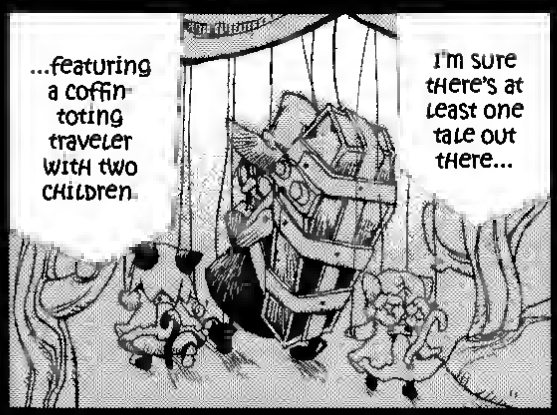

You two don't look too happy.
The puppet show wasn't fun?
He was close.
So close.

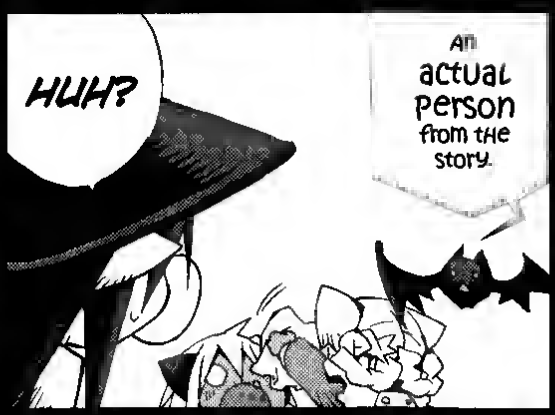

The real Ian was a vagabond who didn't care about his family.
His son dramatized the story out of irony.
.....
I'm not sure I wanted to hear the back-story.

But he dropped all the snow.
And then Ian didn't wake up.
I see. So that's how the story ended.

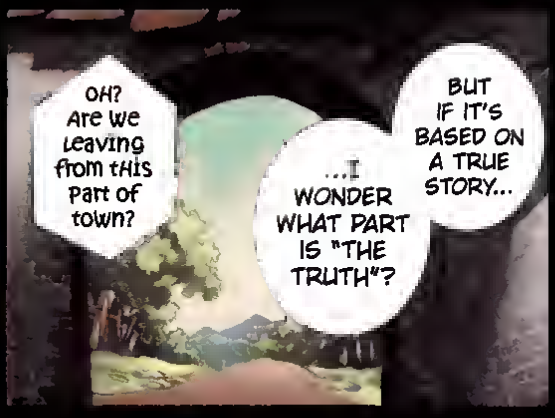

Well, any tale told by folks is gonna change over time.
That's how folk-tales and legends get made.

Don't be so down.
That tale's based on a true story, but it has made-up bits in it too.
Really?
Who told you that?


I'm sure there's at least one tale out there...
...featuring a coffin toting traveler with two children.


An actual person from the story.
HUH?

HUH? WHAT'S THAT?
THERE'S SOMETHING WHITE ALL THE WAY TO THAT MOUNTAIN...


OH? ARE WE LEAVING FROM THIS PART OF TOWN?
...I WONDER WHAT PART IS "THE TRUTH"?
BUT IF IT'S BASED ON A TRUE STORY...

THIS IS THE "FIELD."
OH, I SEE.
AND THE "FLOWER" BLOOMS IN THIS SEASON.

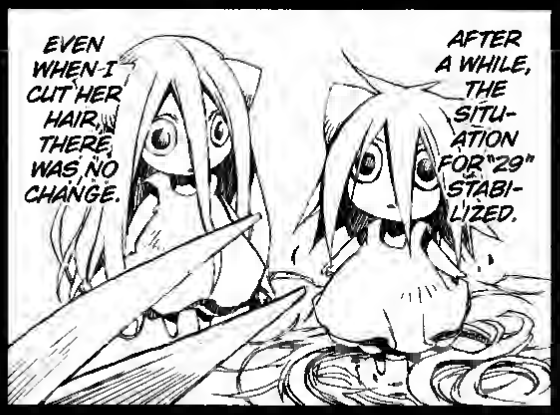
I WAS ADVISED BY THE FLOWER SHOP TO TAKE THIS BACK ROAD.
IT'S A BIT SPECIAL DURING THE FESTIVAL.
HUH.
A ROUTE NOT ON THE MAP IS A PAIN, Y'KNOW.

IT'S "THE SNOW ROAD!!"
IT'S IAN'S PATH!!

...I THOUGHT I'D SEEN BEFORE.
AND SOME-ONE...
...WAS A WHITE WORLD.
THE FIRST THING I SAW...
HM.
I KNEW YOU WOULD WAKE UP FIRST.
...I'D NEVER SEEN BEFORE.
A PLACE AND THINGS...
THAT MAKES YOU...
..."29."

THEY ARE RATHER UNSTABLE.
SOMETIMES THEIR HAIR GROWS DRASTICALLY, OR THEIR LIMBS COME OFF.

...IS A RECORD OF MY EXPERIMENTS, NUMBERS "29" AND "30."
WHAT I AM WRITING HERE...


EVEN WHEN I CUT HER HAIR, THERE WAS NO CHANGE.
AFTER A WHILE, THE SITUATION FOR "29" STABILIZED.

UU.
WHAT'S WRONG?
"30"?
UU.

TO MAKE RECORDING THE DAILY CHANGES EASIER, I DECIDED TO TIE "30"'S HAIR.

OH, IT CAME OFF AGAIN?
.....
THAT'S WHY I TOLD YOU NOT TO STRAIN YOURSELF.

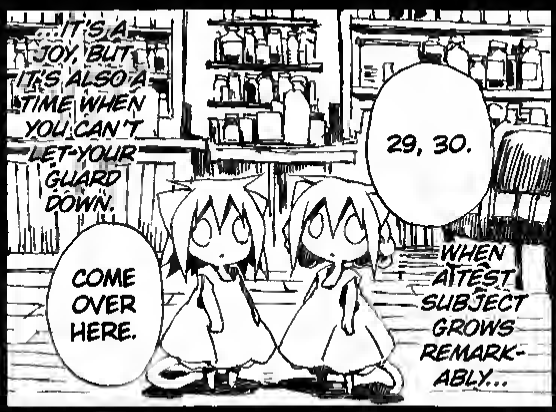
GROW
GROW
GROW
HEY, HEY.
.....
I WONDER WHAT THIS MEANS?

IT HAS BEEN AN ODD EXPERIENCE, BUT AN INTERESTING ONE AS WELL.
YOU WEREN'T WITH "29"?
AND YOUR HAIR'S GROWING AGAIN.
A WEEK HAS PASSED SINCE THE TWO STARTED MOVING.

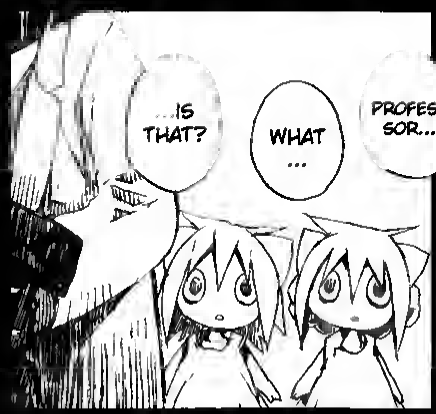
YOU NEED TO GET USED TO IT.
HEAVY.
PROFES-SOR.

THEY STARTED TO ADJUST TO THEIR ENVIRON-MENT QUICKLY.
KU.
NIJU.
AFTER THEY LEARNED HOW TO EXPRESS THEM-SELVES WITH WORDS, THEIR BODIES STOPPED CHANG-ING.
HERE.

IF YOU KEEP IT ON, YOU'LL FORGET IT'S THERE...
CLANK
ガチャ

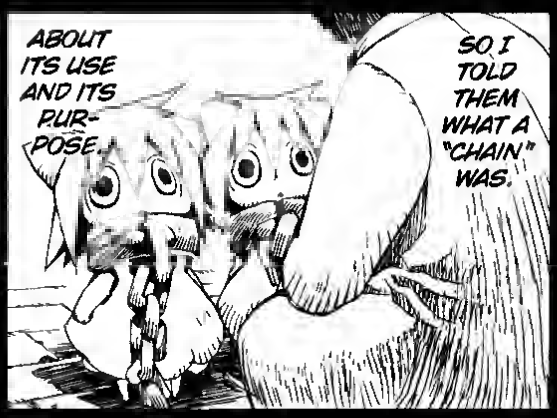

...IT'S A JOY, BUT IT'S ALSO A TIME WHEN YOU CAN'T LET YOUR GUARD DOWN.
29, 30.
COME OVER HERE.
WHEN A TEST SUBJECT GROWS REMARK-ABLY...

HOW DID YOU TAKE OFF THE CHAINS?
?


...IS THAT?
WHAT ...
PROFES-SOR...

!?
I TAKE...
...OFF...
...TOO.

CLANK
ガチャン
THIS IS WHAT IT'S FOR.



I DON'T REMEMBER WHAT KIND OF EXPRESSION I HAD ON MY FACE AS I SAID THAT.

...THAT DEFIED COMMON SENSE.

THERE WERE OTHER EVENTS AND PHENO-MENA...

THAT WAS NORMAL IN THEIR OWN LITTLE WORLD.

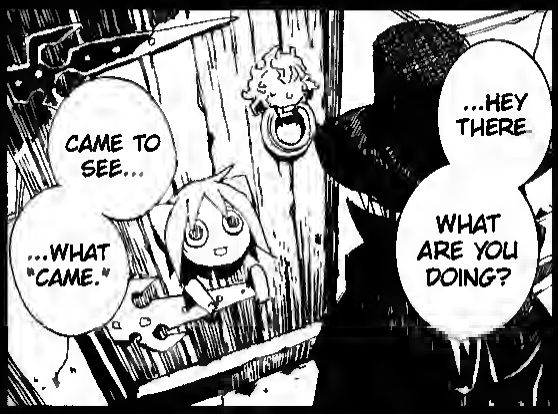
INVISIBLE SENSE OF "SELF."

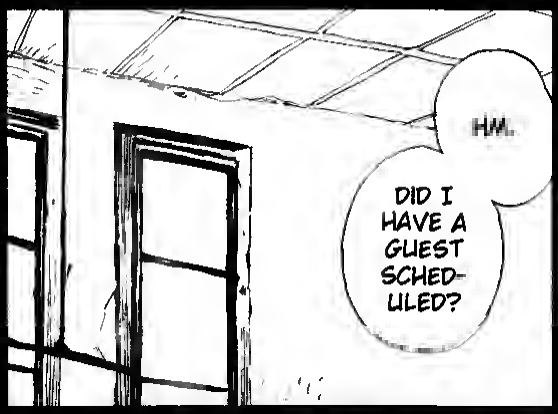
WHO ARE YOU?
PERSON I DON'T KNOW.

ALL RIGHT FOR TODAY...

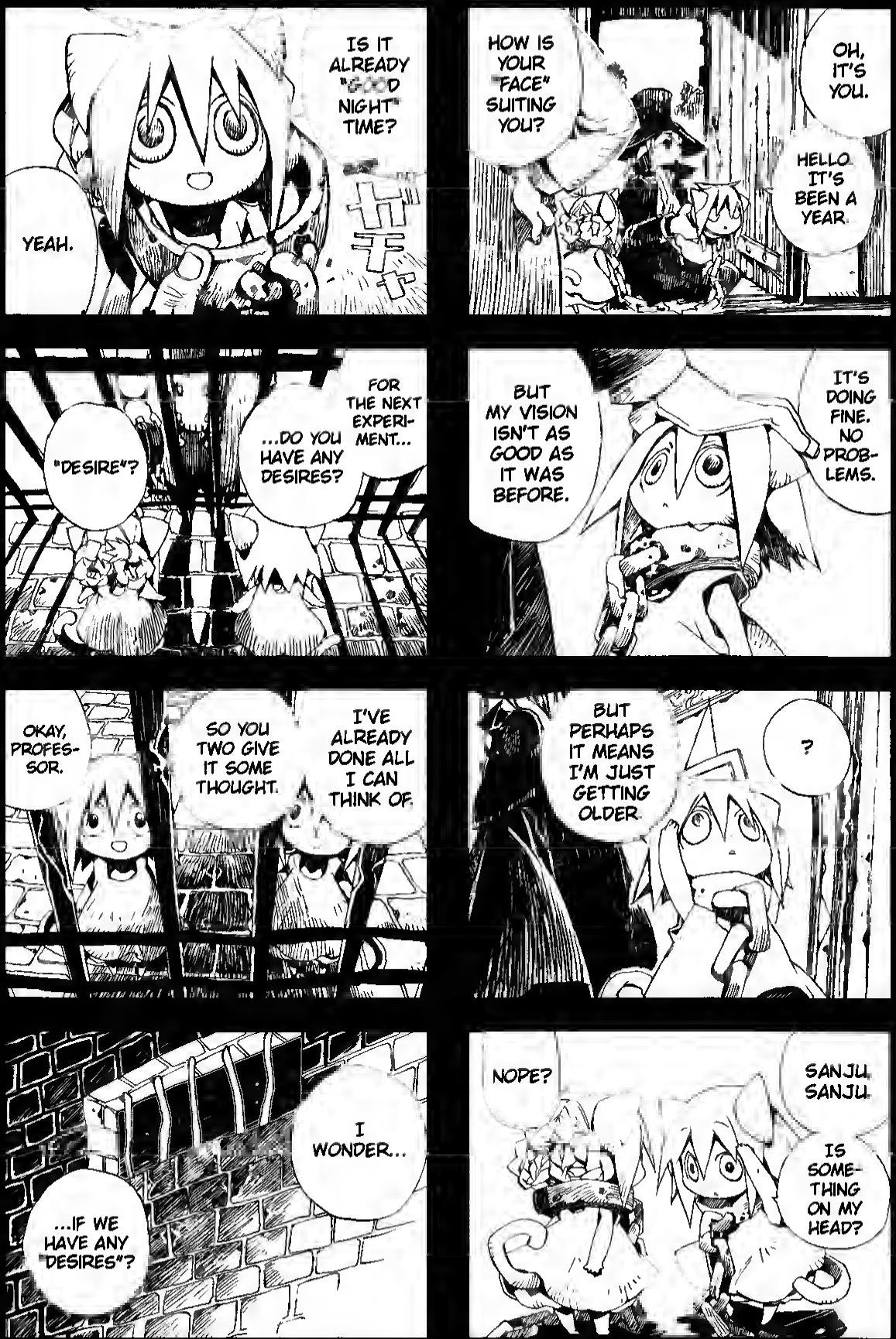
ピッ

PRO-FESSOR, SOMETHING HERE.
SOME-THING COMING.

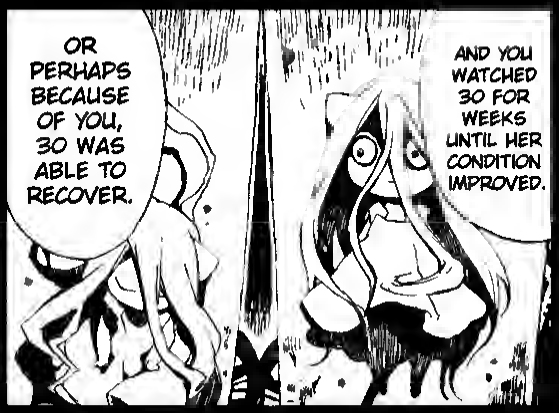

...HEY THERE
WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
CAME TO SEE...
...WHAT "CAME."


HM.
DID I HAVE A GUEST SCHED-ULED?

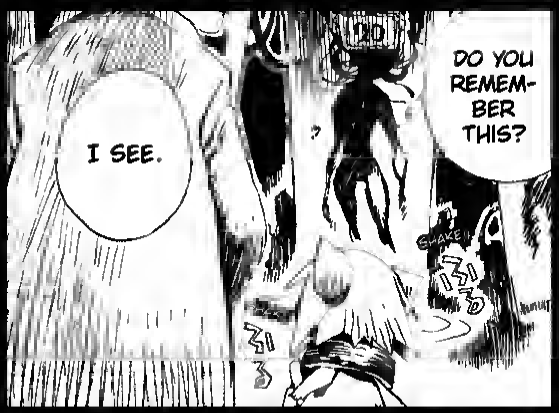
WHERE IS THE REST OF YOUR BODY?
STUCK.
GANG

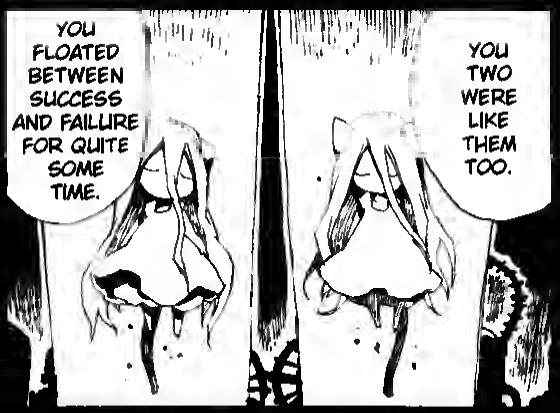

IS IT ALREADY "GOOD NIGHT" TIME?
YEAH.
OH, IT'S YOU.
HELLO. IT'S BEEN A YEAR.
HOW IS YOUR "FACE" SUITING YOU?
FOR THE NEXT EXPERIMENT...
...DO YOU HAVE ANY DESIRES?
"DESIRE"?
IT'S DOING FINE. NO PROBLEMS.
BUT MY VISION ISN'T AS GOOD AS IT WAS BEFORE.
I'VE ALREADY DONE ALL I CAN THINK OF.
SO YOU TWO GIVE IT SOME THOUGHT.
OKAY, PROFESSOR.
?
BUT PERHAPS IT MEANS I'M JUST GETTING OLDER.
I WONDER...
...IF WE HAVE ANY "DESIRES"?
SANJU. SANJU.
IS SOMETHING ON MY HEAD?
NOPE?

WHERE DID YOU GO?
PRO-FESSOR'S GONE.
LOTS OF SOME-ONES.
SOME-ONE'S...
...INSIDE.
...IS WHERE WE CAN WALK. PROFESSOR SAID SO.
THE "WHITE" AREA...
I'M NIJUKU.
WHO ARE YOU?
I DON'T THINK...
...THEY'LL ANSWER.
PROFESSOR?
BUT HERE...
ONLY THIS ROOM...
THEY ARE YOUR SIBLINGS.
...IT FEELS LIKE IT COULD SUCK US IN.
...IS SO DARK INSIDE...

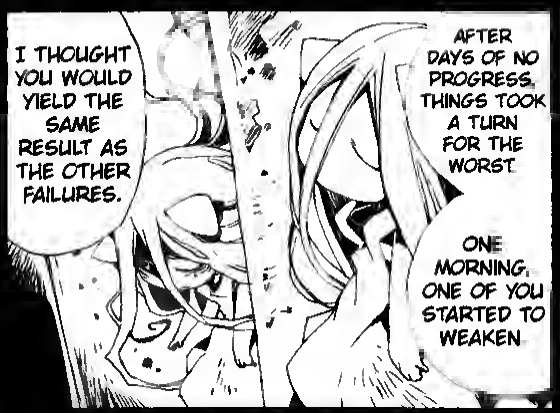

OR PERHAPS BECAUSE OF YOU, 30 WAS ABLE TO RECOVER.
AND YOU WATCHED 30 FOR WEEKS UNTIL HER CONDITION IMPROVED.

1
2
3
4
5
ALL OF THEM ARE FAILURES OR GOOD-FOR-NOTH-INGS.
SOME CAME CLOSE TO LIVING A LONG TIME AGO...


I SEE.
DO YOU REMEM-BER THIS?
SHAKE
ZI
ZI
ZI
ZI

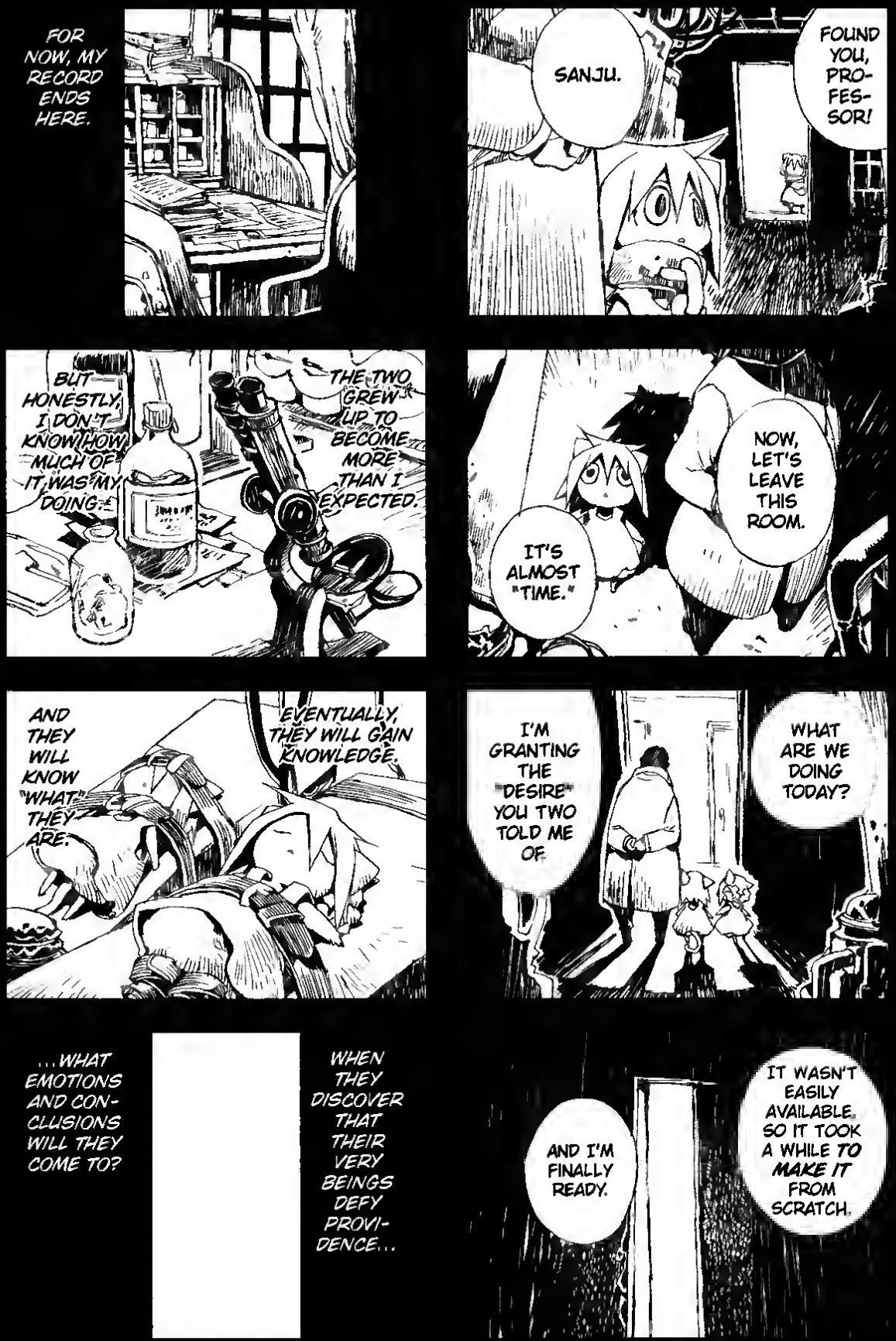

YOU FLOATED BETWEEN SUCCESS AND FAILURE FOR QUITE SOME TIME.
YOU TWO WERE LIKE THEM TOO.

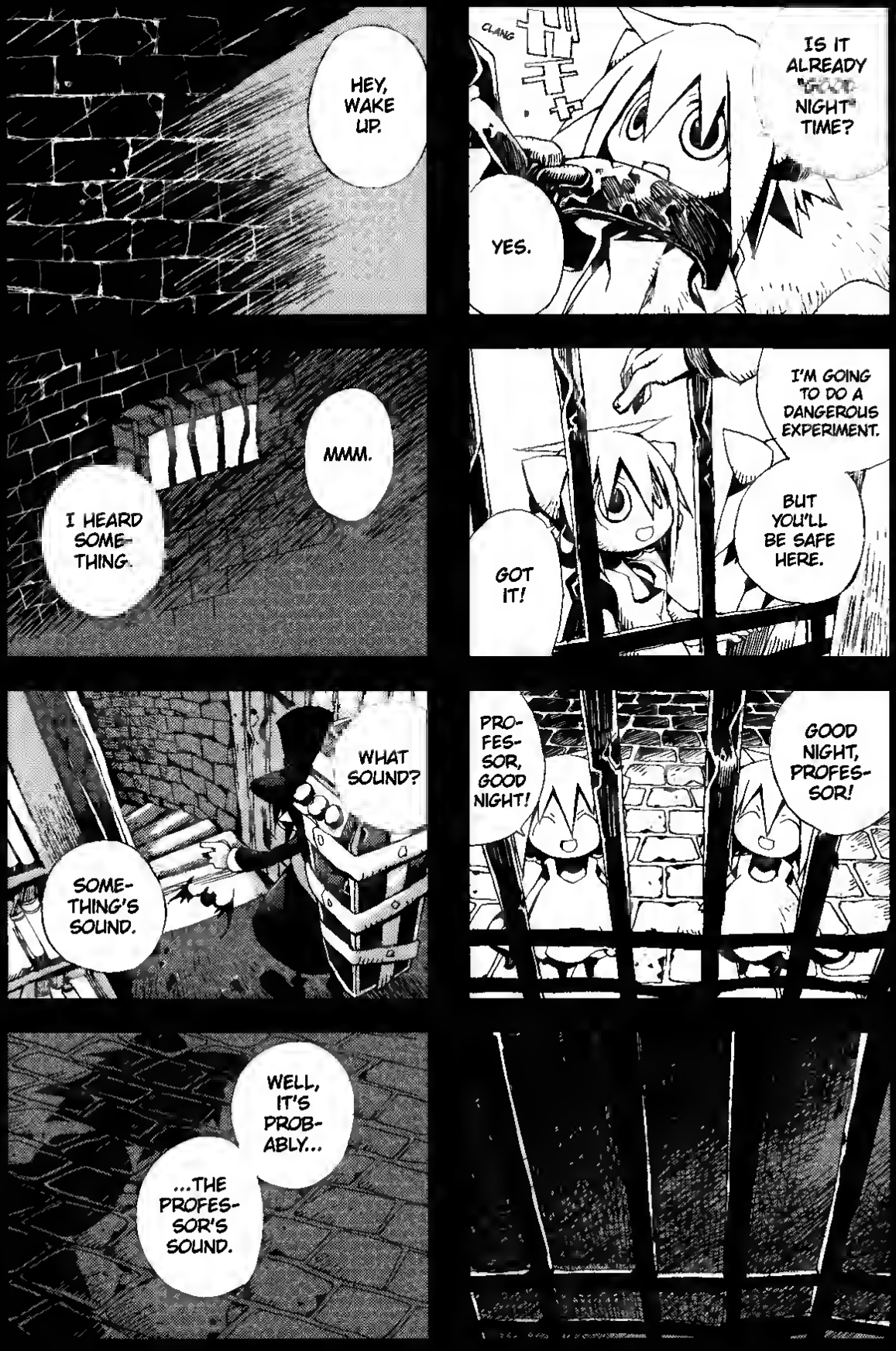
...AL-THOUGH YOU TWO HAVE SEPARATE LIVES...
...29, 30...
BUT THAT WAS WHEN IT OCCURRED TO ME THAT...

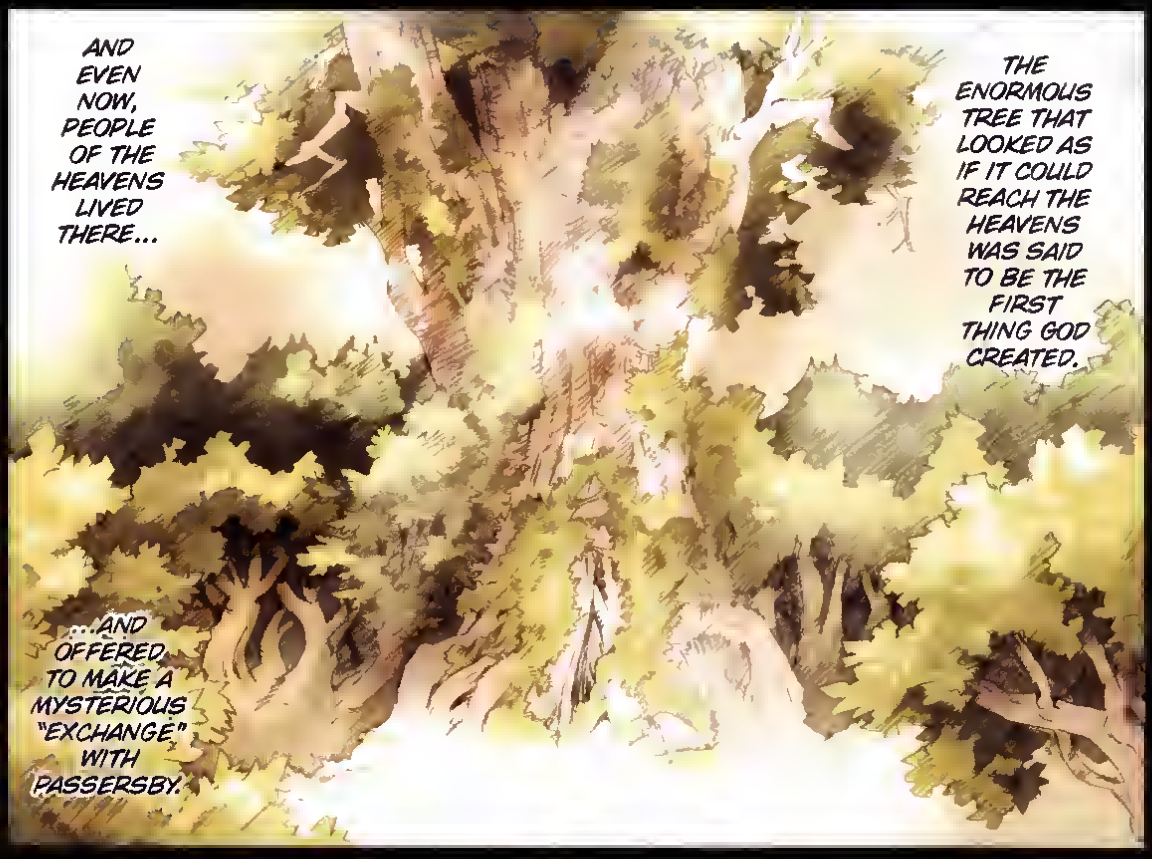

I THOUGHT YOU WOULD YIELD THE SAME RESULT AS THE OTHER FAILURES.
AFTER DAYS OF NO PROGRESS, THINGS TOOK A TURN FOR THE WORST.
ONE MORNING, ONE OF YOU STARTED TO WEAKEN.

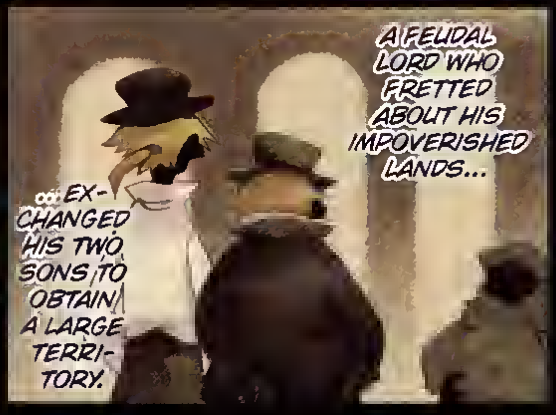
IF ONE OF YOU WAS NOT HERE, YOU BOTH WERE NOT.
...YOU ARE ONE IN TWO BODIES.

...29 WOKE UP.
BUT THEN...

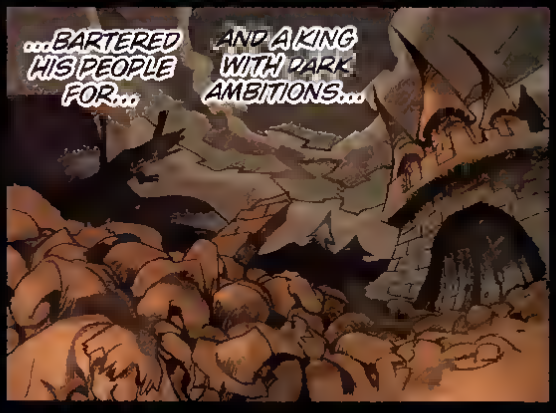

FOR NOW, MY RECORD ENDS HERE.
SANJU.
FOUND YOU, PROFESSOR!
BUT HONESTLY, I DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH OF IT WAS MY DOING.
THE TWO GREW UP TO BECOME MORE THAN I EXPECTED.
NOW, LET'S LEAVE THIS ROOM.
IT'S ALMOST "TIME."
AND THEY WILL KNOW "WHAT" THEY ARE.
EVENTUALLY, THEY WILL GAIN KNOWLEDGE.
I'M GRANTING THE "DESIRE" YOU TWO TOLD ME OF.
WHAT ARE WE DOING TODAY?
...WHAT EMOTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS WILL THEY COME TO?
WHEN THEY DISCOVER THAT THEIR VERY BEINGS DEFY PROVIDENCE...
AND I'M FINALLY READY.
IT WASN'T EASILY AVAILABLE, SO IT TOOK A WHILE TO MAKE IT FROM SCRATCH.

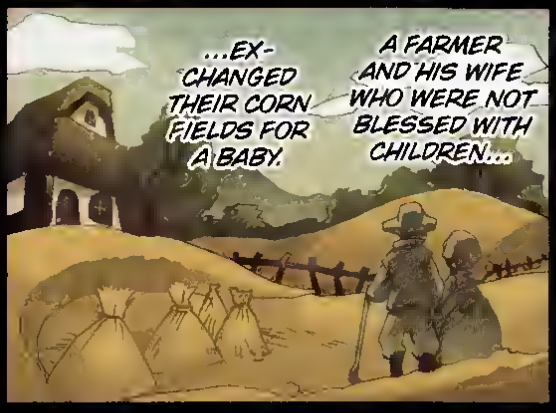

HEY, WAKE UP.
CLANG
IS IT ALREADY "GOOD NIGHT" TIME?
YES.
MMM.
I HEARD SOME-THING.
I'M GOING TO DO A DANGEROUS EXPERIMENT.
BUT YOU'LL BE SAFE HERE.
GOT IT!
WHAT SOUND?
SOME-THING'S SOUND.
PRO-FES-SOR, GOOD NIGHT!
GOOD NIGHT, PROFES-SOR!
WELL, IT'S PROB-ABLY...
...THE PROFES-SOR'S SOUND.


AND EVEN NOW, PEOPLE OF THE HEAVENS LIVED THERE...
THE ENORMOUS TREE THAT LOOKED AS IF IT COULD REACH THE HEAVENS WAS SAID TO BE THE FIRST THING GOD CREATED.
...AND OFFERED TO MAKE A MYSTERIOUS "EXCHANGE" WITH PASSERSBY.

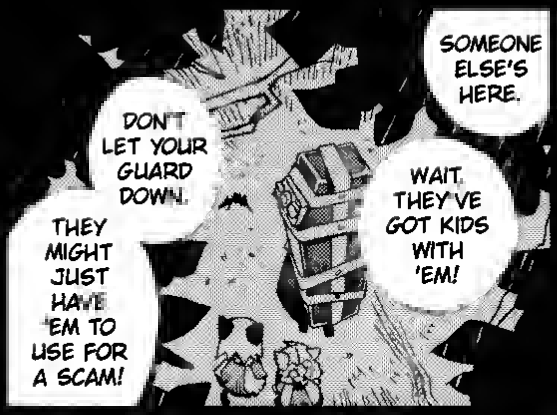

A FEUDAL LORD WHO FRETTED ABOUT HIS IMPOVERISHED LANDS...
...EX-CHANGED HIS TWO SONS TO OBTAIN A LARGE TERRI-TORY.

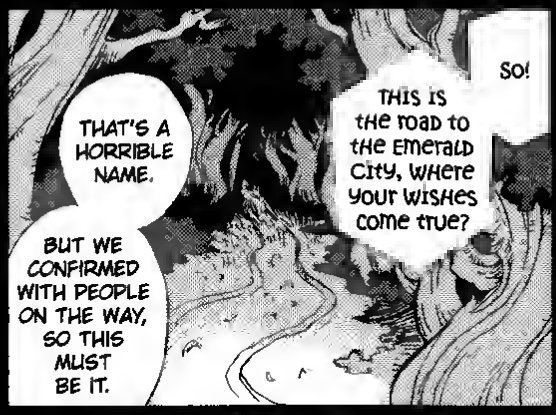
BY EXCHANGING "SOMETHING" ONE HAS...
...ONE CAN OBTAIN "SOMETHING" ONE WANTS.

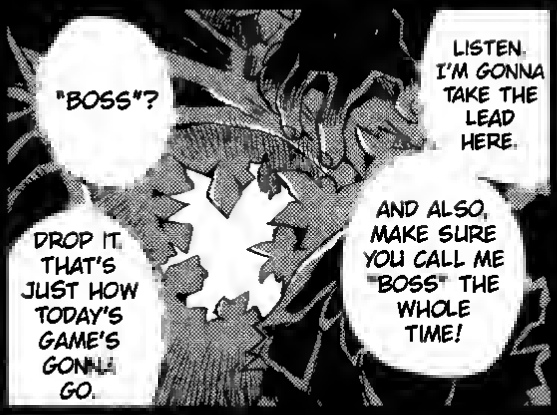

...BARTERED HIS PEOPLE FOR...
AND A KING WITH DARK AMBITIONS...


...EX-CHANGED THEIR CORN FIELDS FOR A BABY.
A FARMER AND HIS WIFE WHO WERE NOT BLESSED WITH CHILDREN...

Well, putting that question aside...
...came from which of the ladies you hit on now, Sen?
So that fairy tale...
Um, um...
...I'd ask where Professor is!
So!
What wish would you like to have granted?
...it got resigned to being a tale to test someone's courage.
But when both the people who went there out of faith and those who went for a laugh never came back...
...the legend used to be more sacred.
A broiled fish?
For that, you'd only get tomorrow's weather report.
This!
But you have to exchange something first.
Are you serious?
It's fishy, not to mention dangerous.
Then maybe I should check it out.
No one comes back?
Sen, could you not tell mean tales like that and make them cry?
...you would have to exchange Nijuku, at least.
For your dear "professor"...
...
...Are you serious about that too?
Crackle
Crackle
And much more so than a lady who would say, "Of course," to someone she just met.
Rumors that would keep people away are more trustworthy than convenient fairy tales.
Nijuku, take care! Goodbye!
The younger one's all for it.
Nijuku, that is.


SOMEONE ELSE'S HERE.
WAIT. THEY'VE GOT KIDS WITH 'EM!
DON'T LET YOUR GUARD DOWN.
THEY MIGHT JUST HAVE 'EM TO USE FOR A SCAM!

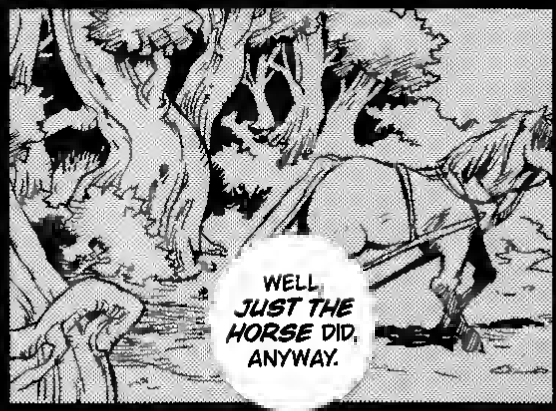

SO!
THIS IS the road to the Emerald City, where your wishes come true?
THAT'S A HORRIBLE NAME.
BUT WE CONFIRMED WITH PEOPLE ON THE WAY, SO THIS MUST BE IT.


LISTEN. I'M GONNA TAKE THE LEAD HERE.
"BOSS"?
AND ALSO, MAKE SURE YOU CALL ME "BOSS" THE WHOLE TIME!
DROP IT. THAT'S JUST HOW TODAY'S GAME'S GONNA GO.

ACCORDING TO THEM, JUST A DAY EARLIER ...
...ARISTOCRATS IN A LARGE CARRIAGE ENTERED THE CITY.
I see. And there're new tracks to prove it.

BEFORE WE GET OUT THERE...
ROUGH TALK?
...YOU GOT ANY ROUGH TALK I CAN USE TO FRIGHTEN 'EM?
LET'S SEE...
WHISPER
WHISPER
WHISPER
HOW ABOUT—
I HEAR SOMETHING.
FROM UP THERE.

Was it okay for them to beat us to it?
I hope wishes aren't first-come, first-served.
NO, THEY MUST'VE ALREADY COME BACK.

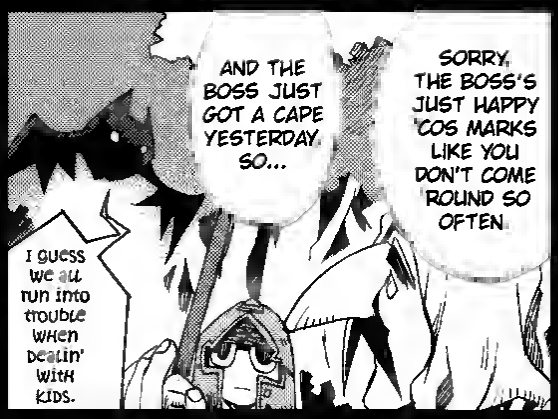

WELL, JUST THE HORSE DID, ANYWAY.

That's our line.
UGH. THEY'RE JUST BATS!
DON'T SCARE ME LIKE THAT!
FLAP
FLAP
FLAP
YOU GOT IT, BOSS!!
LET'S GO!!
VWSH
WELL, LEMME TELL YOU!
I DON'T KNOW.
WHO'RE THESE PEOPLE?
WHAT'S THIS, KURO-CHA?
ONE SWING OF THIS SWORD'LL SLICE UP YOUR BODY AND YOUR GOODS.
WE'RE GONNA CUT YOU TO RIBBONS!
TWO SWINGS'LL TAKE YOUR LEGS CLEAN OFF SO YOU CAN T EVEN RUN AWAY!
IF YOU DON'T WANNA GET SLICED AND DICED...
WOOSH
GET A LOAD OF THIS!!
SO HOW MANY PIECES YOU FEEL LIKE TODAY?
THREE SWINGS AND YOUR HEAD'LL GO FLYIN' TONGUE STILL IN IT. SO'S YOU CAN'T TALK.
Actually I hate to break it to you but...
ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME!?
You're the one who said to look.
HOW'D YOU GET DOWN FROM UP THERE?
SHINY
SHINY
THAT SHINY-SHINY IS COOL!!
AAAGGHH!!
...I'm already in a thousand pieces.

SORRY.
HMPH.
THEN I'LL DO SOMETHING BANDIT-LIKE, SHALL I?
IT'S THEIR FIRST TIME GETTING TO SEE REAL BANDITS.

DON'T CALL MY OUTFIT FUNNY!! YOU LOUSY BAT!
Hey, your funny clothes and surprise appearance are totally entertaining our little ones.

I SEE.
YOU CAME TO MAKE A DEAL WITH GOD, DIDN'T YA?
THAT'S WHAT YOU'RE AFTER WHEN YOU HUNT HERE.
DON'T YOU HAVE SOMETHING TO "TRADE" IN THERE?


SORRY, THE BOSS'S JUST HAPPY 'COS MARKS LIKE YOU DON'T COME 'ROUND SO OFTEN.
AND THE BOSS JUST GOT A CAPE YESTERDAY, SO...
I guess we all run into trouble when dealin' with kids.

BUT WE'RE JUST TRAVEL-ERS.
WE DON'T HAVE ANYTHING THAT YOU'D WANT.
DANG IT, HOW LAME!

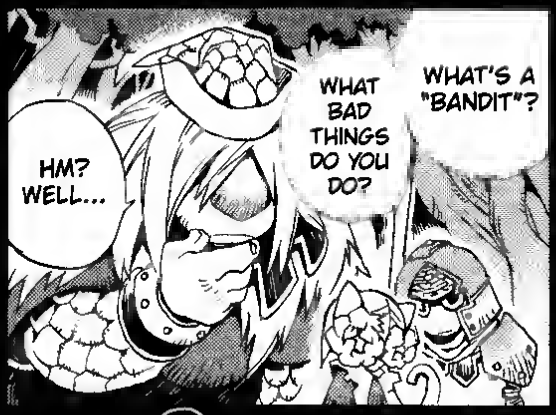
HEY! HOW DARE YOU TREAT YOUR BOSS LIKE SOME BABY!
YOU PUNKS! TIE 'EM UP AND DO IT QUICK!!
DON'T GO EASY ON 'EM 'COS THEY'RE RUNTS!!

THEN I'LL SETTLE FOR THAT HAT.
IT'LL GO NICE WITH MY CAPE!

'KAAAY, BOSS!
NOT YOU TWO!!
YOU MOCKIN' ME WITH THOSE HEAD-PIECES!?

I have a feeling drinking with them around will be fun.
SHEESH. FIRST THE BOSS, AND NOW THESE TWO. IT'S A HARD JOB DEALING WITH TYKES
LET'S PLAY! LET'S PLAY!
STOP SCURRYING ROUND TOP OF MY HEAD!

SORRY, THIS IS IMPORTANT. SO I HAD TO PROTECT IT.
BUT NEXT TIME...


HM? WELL...
WHAT BAD THINGS DO YOU DO?
WHAT'S A "BANDIT"?

...YOU SHOULD THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS...
...TO TURN YOUR BLADE GAINST SOMEONE OR TO TAKE SOMEONE ELSE'S THINGS BEFORE YOU ACT.

WHAP!
OW!!
FOR EXAM-PLE...
Hey, Don't Hit 'em...
!?

WHaaaat!?
DON'T THINK I'LL GO EASY ON YOU JUST 'COS YOU'RE A GIRL.

HUH?
? WASN'T ME.
THEN THAT WAS...

KURO-CHA! ARE YOU OKAY!?
Are you talking about me?
HOW D'YOU LIKE THAT? YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONE WITH WEIRD ANIMAL FRIENDS!

TOTO!! KILL THIS ONE!!
DAMMIT! NOW I'M REALLY MAD!
FWEEEET

.....?
.....

BEHIND YOU!!
!? KURO!!
TOTO?

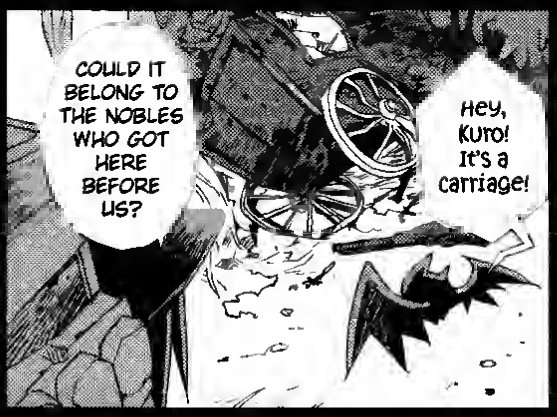
WHAT'RE YOU DOING, TOTO!? WHY'D YOU LET GO!?
YOU GOTTA TEAR HIM TO PIECES!
FWIP

.....
"TASTES UTTERLY FOUL," YOU SAY!?
HUNH !?
NOO

KURO!!
CRUNCH

YOU GUYS WANNA GET TO THE TREE, RIGHT?
HUH? YEAH.
I'LL TAKE YOU. FOLLOW ME.

ANIMALS ARE SENSITIVE.
YOU'RE NOT THE TYPE TO BE FUSSY ABOUT TASTE...
WHAT DOES THAT MEAN!?


COULD IT BELONG TO THE NOBLES WHO GOT HERE BEFORE US?
Hey, Kuto! It's a carriage!

HE PROBABLY PICKED UP ON...
...THE ODOR OF DEATH FROM MY BODY.

THEY ALREADY MADE THEIR "TRADE."
TRADE?
IT'S BEST IF YA DON'T LOOK INSIDE.
AND DON'T LET 'EM LOOK EITHER.

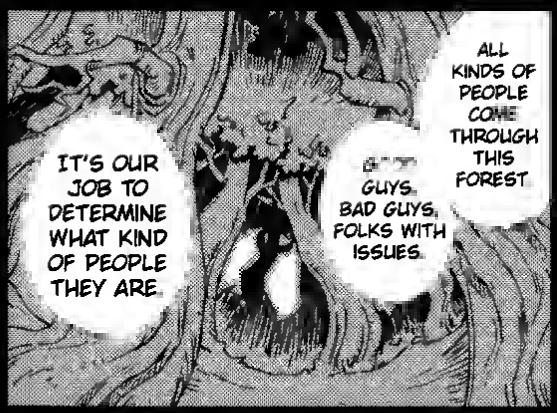
BOSS...
THESE PEOPLE ARE...
.....

TRADED THEIR LIVES...
...FOR THEIR CURIOSITY.

"PASS?"
DAMMIT! FINE! I'LL ALLOW IT!
YOU MAY PASS!

IF WE LET OUR GUARD DOWN WE SUFFER FROM DIFFERENCES IN OUR CIVILIZATIONS.
WELL, WE'RE ALSO WORKIN' HARD TO PROTECT THE FOREST FROM WICKED PEOPLE.
? WHAT KINDA BAND ARE YOU?

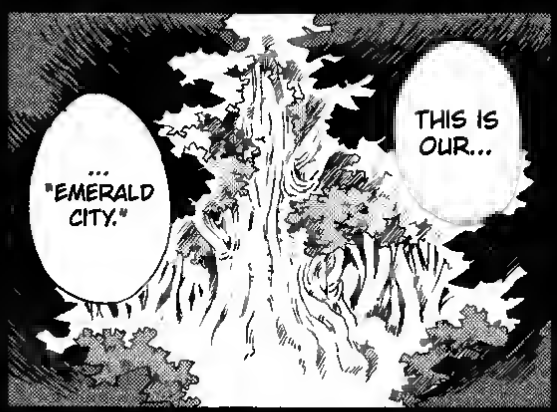
YOU CAN THINK OF ME AS COLD.
THAT'S WHAT "PLAYING BANDIT" IS FOR.
YOU'RE RIGHT.


ALL KINDS OF PEOPLE COME THROUGH THIS FOREST
GUYS. BAD GUYS. FOLKS WITH ISSUES.
IT'S OUR JOB TO DETERMINE WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE THEY ARE.

EVEN THOUGH I ALMOST KILLED YOU?
BUT YOU'RE NOT CRUEL.

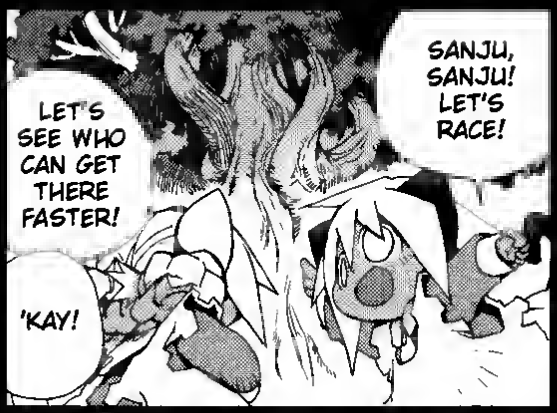
HERE WE ARE.

WELL...
GUESS NOT.
BUT YOU AND YOUR BAND DIDN'T INTEND ON HURTING THE KIDS FROM THE START, RIGHT?
"JUST" ME.


THIS IS OUR...
... "EMERALD CITY."

I DON'T GET YOU AT ALL...
I THINK I CAN PLACE MY FAITH IN A "GUESS" FROM A GIRL I JUST MET.
YEAH.

...YOU MIGHT THINK THAT THE PATH YOU TOOK WAS THE RIGHT ONE.
OR IF A DIFFERENT BRANCH IS WILTING FROM BEING EATEN BY INSECTS...
EVERY TIME WE MOVE FORWARD, WE CHOOSE ONE BRANCH AMONG MANY.
THE ROUTE WE WALK IS SIMILAR TO A TREE BRANCH.
...IS THE RIGHT ONE FOR ME?
THEN WHICH PATH...
...YOU MIGHT REGRET NOT SELECTING IT AS YOUR PATH.
IF A BRANCH SEPARATE FROM YOURS BLOOMS A BEAUTIFUL FLOWER...
WE'RE HERE.


SANJU, SANJU! LET'S RACE!
LET'S SEE WHO CAN GET THERE FASTER!
'KAY!

WOW.
WOW!
WOW. IT'S HUGE. SO THAT'S THE TREE?

THIS IS MY PATH!
YOU CAN'T USE IT!
NO FAIR!
THEN, THEN...

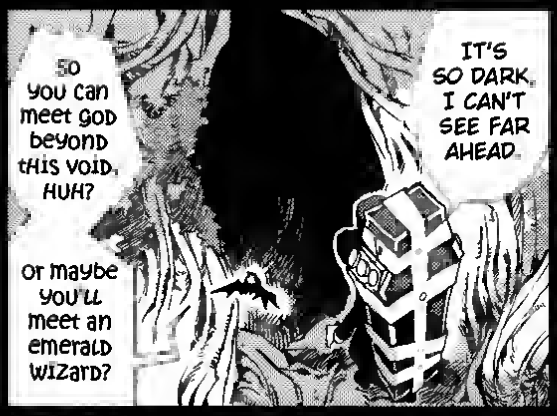
AND WHEN IS THE GOD SUPPOSED TO COME DOWN?
WHO KNOWS?
WHY, DOROTHY.

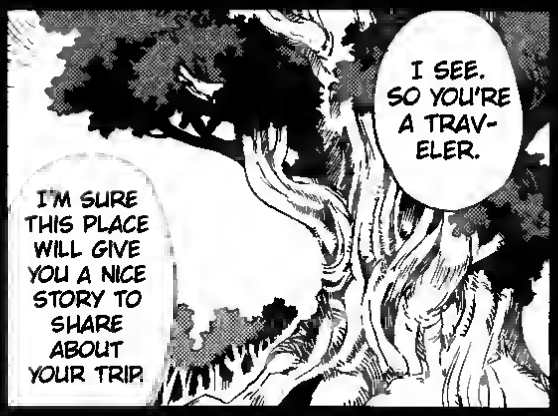
UM... UMM!

HOW UNUSUAL FOR YOU TO BRING SOMEONE HERE.

UMMM...

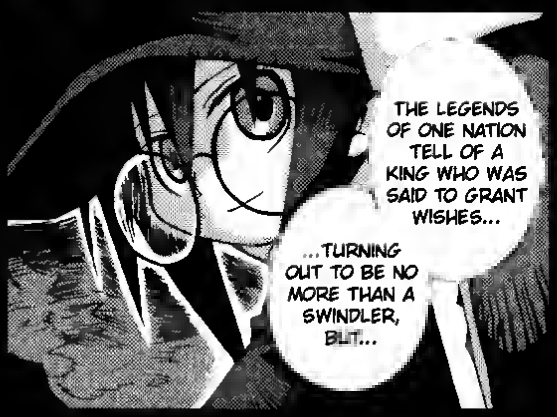
THAT'S JUST MY GRANNY.
COULD THAT BE—
...I'M GETTING THE SENSE OF SOMETHING INHUMAN FROM HER.
THAT CRONE WHO LOOKS LIKE SHE'S TURNING INTO THE SURROUNDING TREES...
THERE'S YOUR WITCH KURO


IT'S SO DARK. I CAN'T SEE FAR AHEAD.
So you can meet God beyond this void, huh?
Or maybe you'll meet an emerald wizard?


I SEE. SO YOU'RE A TRAV-ELER.
I'M SURE THIS PLACE WILL GIVE YOU A NICE STORY TO SHARE ABOUT YOUR TRIP.

WAIT HERE, SEN.
TAKE CARE OF NIJUKU AND SANJU.
Hm? Okay.
But you sure you wanna go in alone?

IS IT TRUE THAT WISHES ...
HEH HEH.
HMM, WHO CAN SAY?
...CAN BE GRANTED HERE IF YOU TRADE FOR IT?


THE LEGENDS OF ONE NATION TELL OF A KING WHO WAS SAID TO GRANT WISHES...
...TURNING OUT TO BE NO MORE THAN A SWINDLER, BUT...

WHY DON'T YOU GO FIND OUT FOR YOUR-SELF?
THAT'S THE WAY IN THERE.

...I WANNA KNOW WHO HOLDS COURT IN THE DEPTHS OF THIS TREE.
SO I'M GONNA GO FIND OUT.

WOW.
I'VE NEVER SEEN A TREE WITH SUCH A LARGE KNOT-HOLE.
Man, this gives me the willies! Something could be lurking in there!
AND I'VE NEVER MET A BAT WHO'S SCARED OF THE DARK.

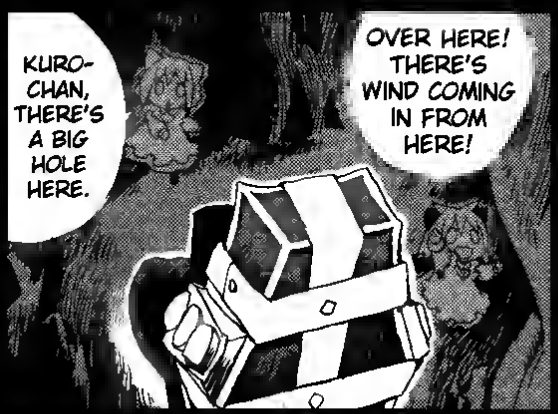
IT WAS DARK.
NOTHING WAS IN THERE.
SHEESH. WHAT WERE YOU GONNA DO IF YOU RAN INTO SOME WEIRD GOD?

IT REALLY IS PITCH-BLACK...
I FEEL LIKE IT'LL BE A DEAD END IF I PUT MY HAND OUT.
NOT TO MENTION IT'S LIKE THIS DARKNESS CONTINUES ALL THE WAY TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD.

YOU SAW NOTHING AND MET NO ONE?
YOUR HEARTS MUST BE PURE.
WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

!?
COME THIS WAY.
NOT THAT WAY.

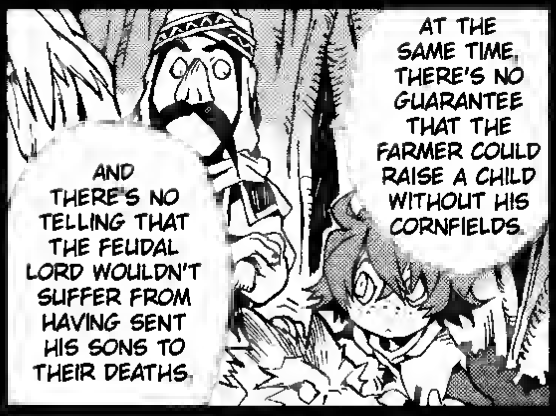
AH, THERE YOU ARE.
.....

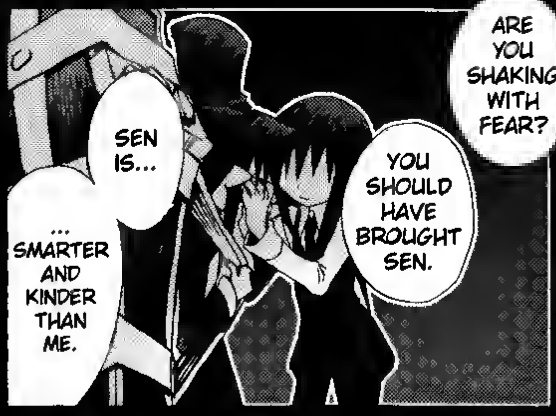

KURO-CHAN, THERE'S A BIG HOLE HERE.
OVER HERE! THERE'S WIND COMING IN FROM HERE!

I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU.
KURO.

WHEN DID YOU TWO GET IN THERE!?
SOMETHING CAME TUMBLING OUT.

LET'S SAY THERE WAS A CURE FOR THEIR AILMENT IN AN ADVANCED NATION.
FOR EXAMPLE, THE FARMER AND HIS WIFE WHO COULDN'T HAVE KIDS ...
BUT WHAT IF ITS PRICE WAS EQUAL TO THE SALE OF ALL THEIR CORNFIELDS?
I HAD A HUNCH.
I GUESS NOT.
YOU DON'T SEEM SURPRISED.
OR THE FEUDAL LORD WHO WANTED TO RULE OVER A LARGER TERRITORY.
WHAT IF HE COULD GET A REWARD TO BUY MORE TERRITORY BY SENDING HIS TWO SONS TO THE BATTLEFIELD TO BE KILLED?
I KNOW WHAT YOU DESIRE.
AND WHAT YOU NEED TO MAKE THAT WISH COME TRUE.
AS LONG AS THEY'RE NOT PICKY BOUT THE MEANS.
PEOPLE CAN TAKE CARE OF THEMSELVES WITHOUT A GOD.
So that's what you're getting at by making a "trade" for a WISH...
YOUR WISH...
...IS TO BREAK YOUR CURSE AND GET YOUR BODY BACK.
BUT ALL IT IS, IS THAT YOU'RE PAYING A PRICE EQUIVALENT TO THE VALUE OF YOUR WISH.
...SOUNDS [illegible] SURE.
MAKING A TRADE WITH [illegible]...
...IS NIJUKU AND SANJU.
WHAT YOU MUST TRADE FOR THIS WISH TO BE GRANTED ...


AT THE SAME TIME, THERE'S NO GUARANTEE THAT THE FARMER COULD RAISE A CHILD WITHOUT HIS CORNFIELDS.
AND THERE'S NO TELLING THAT THE FEUDAL LORD WOULDN'T SUFFER FROM HAVING SENT HIS SONS TO THEIR DEATHS.


ARE YOU SHAKING WITH FEAR?
YOU SHOULD HAVE BROUGHT SEN.
SEN IS...
... SMARTER AND KINDER THAN ME.

PEOPLE HAVE MANY CHOICES.
AND BY NATURE, WE TRY TO AVOID THE INHUMANE OR COSTLY ONES.
"OZ" KNOWS EVERY-THING ABOUT EVERY-ONE.
HE'LL ATTACK THE TINIEST DOUBTS THAT LINGER IN THE CORNERS OF YOUR MIND.

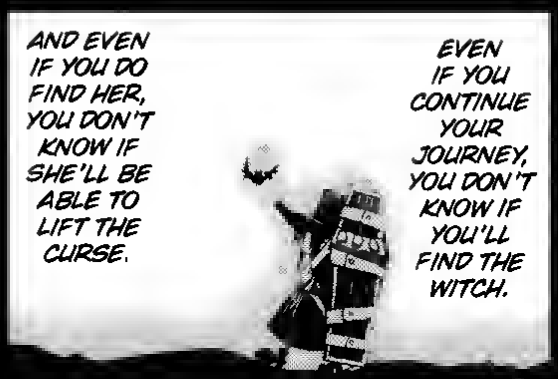
SO I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE DANGEROUS FOR HIM.
YOU'RE RIGHT THAT WAS SEN-SIBLE.

IN THERE, YOU CAN SEE THE REAL YOU.
Isn't that more like the whispers of a devil rather than a God?

KURO.
IT'S GETTING PRETTY BAD, ISN'T IT?

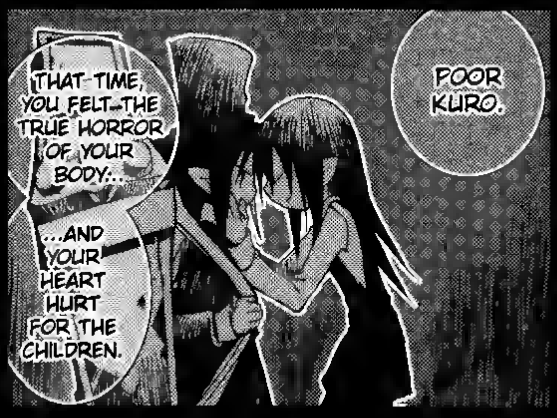
THE ONE WHO DETERMINES WHETHER A GOD OR A DEVIL LIES BEYOND THE DARKNESS
...IS THE PERSON WHO'S GONE IN THERE.

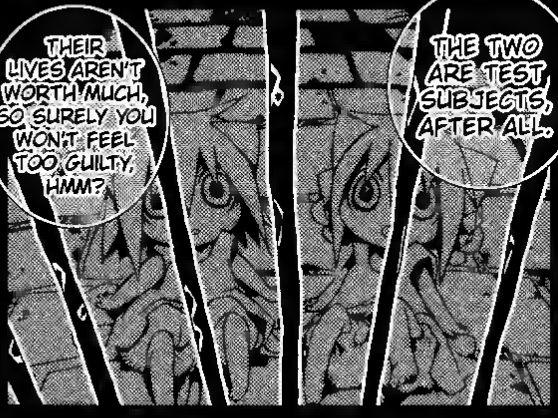
I THINK IT'S ABOUT TIME YOU GOT DESPERATE.

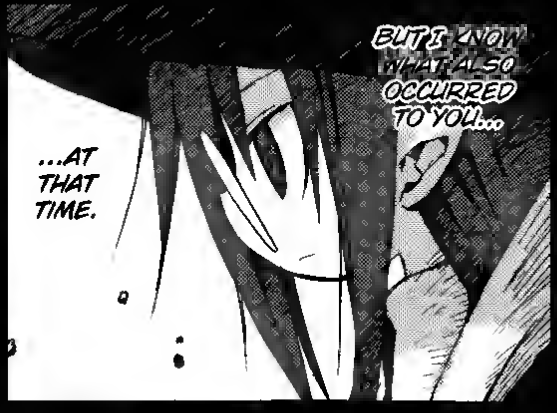

AND EVEN IF YOU DO FIND HER, YOU DON'T KNOW IF SHE'LL BE ABLE TO LIFT THE CURSE.
EVEN IF YOU CONTINUE YOUR JOURNEY, YOU DON'T KNOW IF YOU'LL FIND THE WITCH.

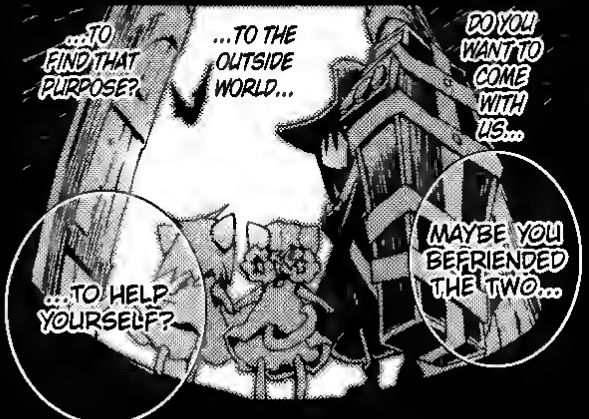
...NIJUKU'S BODY TURNED ALL BLACK.
A LONG TIME AGO...
...DUE TO THEIR MYSTERIOUS POWERS...

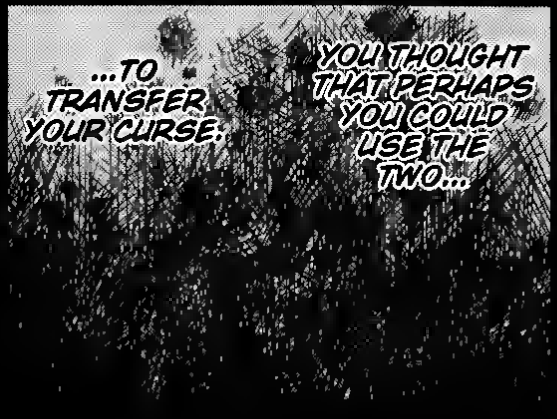
MAYBE THEN YOU COULD FIND A WAY TO BREAK THE CURSE THROUGH SCIENCE.
BUT WHAT IF YOU HANDED THE TWO OVER TO A LARGE RESEARCH FACILITY?


POOR KURO.
THAT TIME, YOU FELT THE TRUE HORROR OF YOUR BODY...
...AND YOUR HEART HURT FOR THE CHILDREN.


THEIR LIVES AREN'T WORTH MUCH, SO SURELY YOU WON'T FEEL TOO GUILTY, HMM?
THE TWO ARE TEST SUBJECTS, AFTER ALL.


BUT I KNOW WHAT ALSO OCCURRED TO YOU...
...AT THAT TIME.


...TO FIND THAT PURPOSE?
...TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD...
DO YOU WANT TO COME WITH US...
MAYBE YOU BEFRIENDED THE TWO...
...TO HELP YOURSELF?


...TO TRANSFER YOUR CURSE.
YOU THOUGHT THAT PERHAPS YOU COULD USE THE TWO...

THAT'S WHY I CAN'T MAKE THIS TRADE.
I'M GOING BACK.
.....

HOW NOSTALGIC.
THERE WAS A TIME WHEN I THOUGHT THAT WAY.
BUT...

GOOD-BYE, KURO.
IF YOU LOSE YOUR WAY AGAIN, YOU'RE WELCOME TO COME BACK HERE.

...THAT'S...
...NO LONGER AN OPTION.

FARE-WELL, KURO.
EVEN THOUGH I CAME HERE, I WASN'T LOST, YOU KNOW.
AND I DON'T PLAN ON GETTING LOST IN THE FUTURE EITHER.

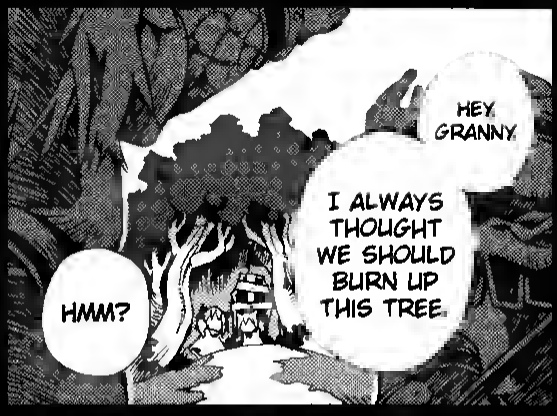
...TO KURO-CHAN!
WE'RE GIVING OUR WHITE...
WE'RE GIVING.

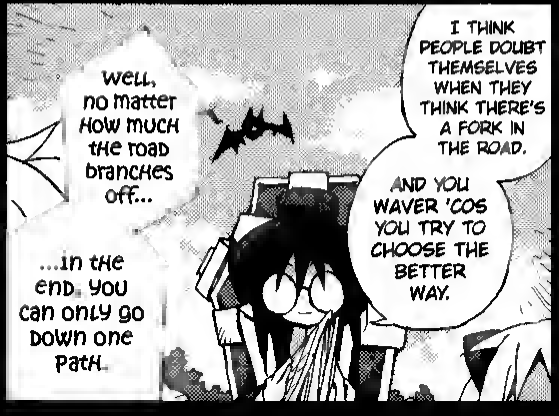
SO I DON'T THINK I'LL BE COMING BACK.

AT THAT MOMENT, THOSE DARK FEELINGS...
...VANISHED COMPLETELY.

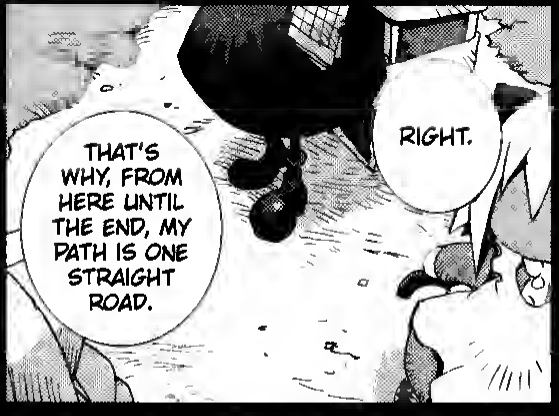
IT'S KURO-CHAN'S THAT, RIGHT?
IS THIS THAT?
KURO-CHA!
KURO-CHAN!
OH, SHE'S back!
What!? DID YOU two go back in again WITHOUT permission?
MY GLASSES.
OH, YEAH. THESE GOT TAKEN FROM ME IN THERE.
"OZ"?
OH.
YOU LOOK LIKE YOU RESOLVED EVERY-THING.
WHAT TRICK DID "OZ" TRY TO PLAY ON YOU?
WE FOUND THEM OVER THERE.
WE DIDN'T GO INTO THE DARK PLACE!
REALLY?
THEN MAYBE HE DECIDED TO GIVE THEM BACK.
I'M GLAD I MET HIM.
I GOT TO CONFIRM...
WITH THESE GLASSES FOR A TRADE...
.....ALL WE'LL GET IS TOMORROW'S WEATHER REPORT.
...I'LL PROBABLY REGRET IT ONE WAY OR ANOTHER.
...THAT NO MATTER WHAT DECISION I MAKE...

"IT'S A STRAIGHT ROAD."
I GUESS THAT'S HOW I NEED TO THINK.
HUH?
WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?


HEY, GRANNY.
I ALWAYS THOUGHT WE SHOULD BURN UP THIS TREE.
HMM?

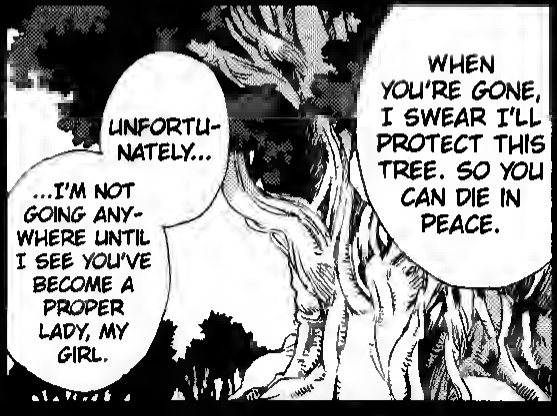

I THINK PEOPLE DOUBT THEMSELVES WHEN THEY THINK THERE'S A FORK IN THE ROAD.
AND YOU WAVER 'COS YOU TRY TO CHOOSE THE BETTER WAY.
Well, no matter how much the road branches off...
...in the end, you can only go down one path.

ALL KINDS OF WEIRDOS COME 'ROUND WITH CRAZY THOUGHTS IN THEIR HEADS...
...AND THE BAD RUMORS SPREAD LIKE A FLU.
HOH-HOH! THAT'S TRUE.

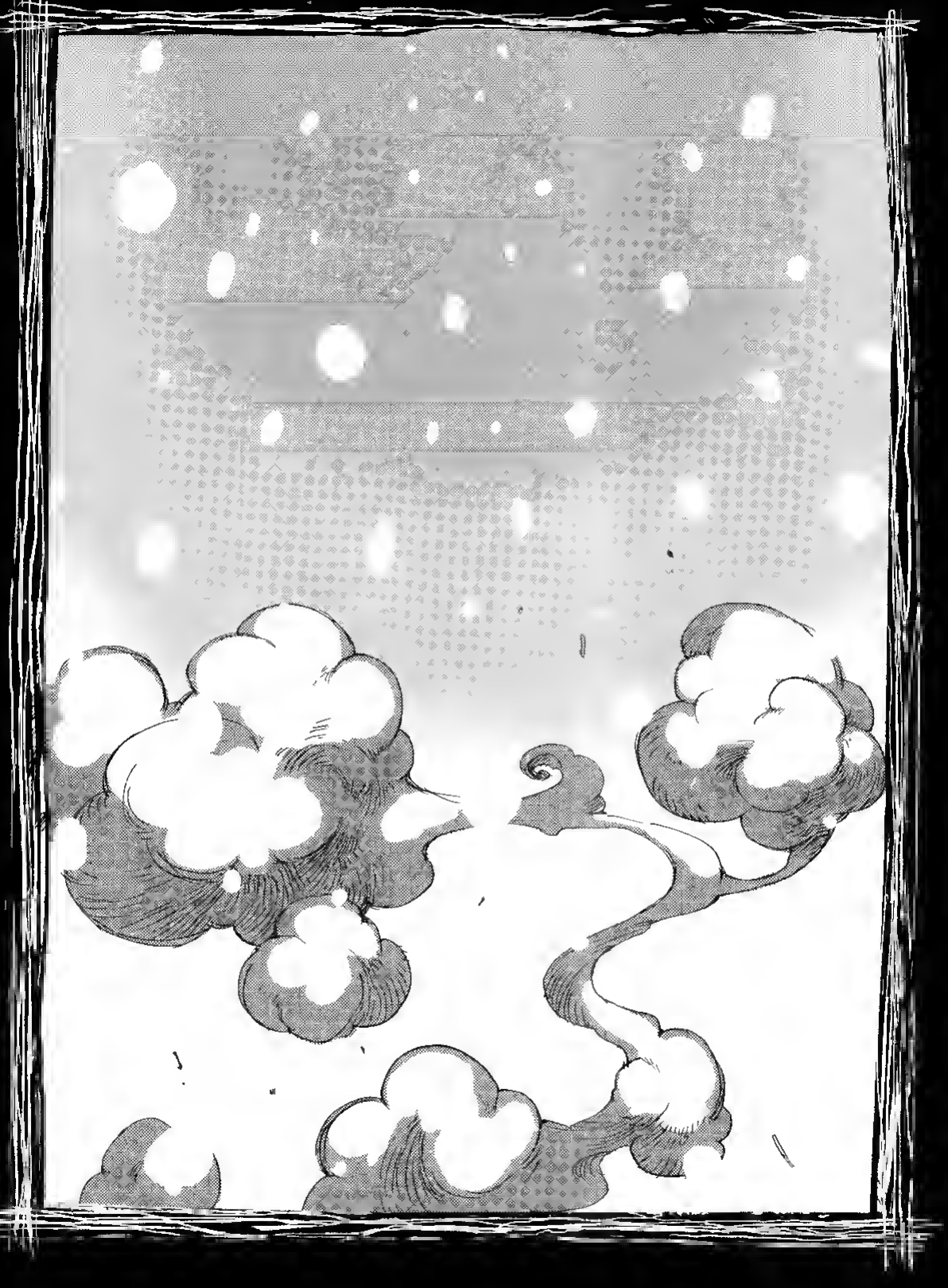

RIGHT.
THAT'S WHY, FROM HERE UNTIL THE END, MY PATH IS ONE STRAIGHT ROAD.

BUT NOW I KNOW WHY YOU KEEP IT AROUND.
IT DOESN'T HAPPEN A LOT, BUT...
...SOMETIMES PEOPLE WHO ARE TRULY LOST COME BY, LIKE KURO.

AND I'LL TAKE ANYTHING THAT IT THROWS MY WAY.


WHEN YOU'RE GONE, I SWEAR I'LL PROTECT THIS TREE. SO YOU CAN DIE IN PEACE.
UNFORTU-NATELY...
...I'M NOT GOING ANY-WHERE UNTIL I SEE YOU'VE BECOME A PROPER LADY, MY GIRL.

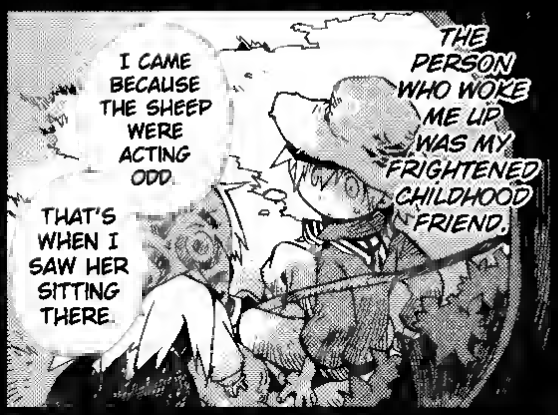
HEY, DOROTHY.
HUH?
OH!
GRANNY! IT'S FUKASHIGI-SAN! HE'S HERE!
OH, MY.
IT'S BEEN A WHILE. HOW ARE YOU?
I THOUGHT YOU WOULDN'T BE BACK FOR ANOTHER TWENTY YEARS.
HELLO.
I DON'T KNOW IF IT WAS FOR CONFIRMATION OR AS A WARNING.
BUT I FELT I WANTED TO DROP BY.
THE OTHER DAY, SOMEONE LIKE YOU CAME TO VISIT.
LIKE ME?
...
YES. FOR A MOMENT, I EVEN THOUGHT IT WAS YOU.
THIS PERSON WAS DRESSED IN BLACK, AND EVEN HAD A BLACK HAT, AND WAS CARRYING A COFFIN...
I SEE...
...AND WAS ACCOMPANIED BY SOME KIDS AND A BAT.
WELL, ANYHOW! ARE YOU STAYING LONG THIS TIME?
I WANT TO HEAR ALL YOUR STORIES!

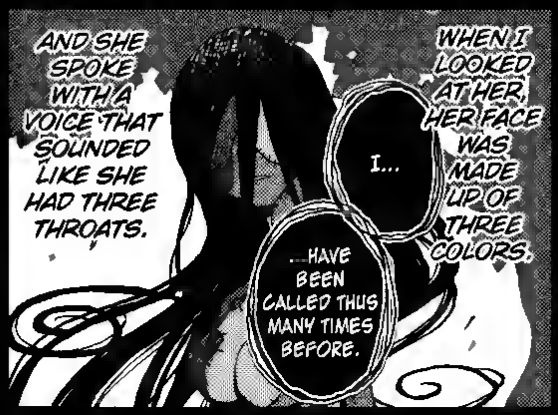


—It came upon them suddenly.

ENO.
BUT ON THIS DAY...
WAKE UP.
I WAS DOING THE SAME WORK I DO, DAY IN AND DAY OUT.
IT WAS A SCENE NO DIFFERENT FROM THAT ON ANY OTHER DAY.
A STRANGE "SOME-THING"...
...ENO.
THAT'S WHY IT WAS COMMON FOR ME TO DOZE OFF.
...HAD TAKEN UP A SEAT BESIDE ME.

...“WITCH”?


I CAME BECAUSE THE SHEEP WERE ACTING ODD.
THAT'S WHEN I SAW HER SITTING THERE.
THE PERSON WHO WOKE ME UP WAS MY FRIGHTENED CHILDHOOD FRIEND.


AND SHE SPOKE WITH A VOICE THAT SOUNDED LIKE SHE HAD THREE THROATS.
I...
...HAVE BEEN CALLED THUS MANY TIMES BEFORE.
WHEN I LOOKED AT HER, HER FACE WAS MADE UP OF THREE COLORS.

IRI LIKES TO USE WORDS SHE JUST LEARNED.
THERE ARE "DANGEROUS" "INCIDENTS" THAT OCCUR DURING THE HARVEST SEASON.
ENO, YOU NEED TO BE MORE CAREFUL.

...NOT BECAUSE SHE WAS COWERING AT THE SIGHT OF THIS CREATURE...
AND MY CHATTY FRIEND BEGAN GRABBING AT ME...

WHISPER
BUT JUST BETWEEN US, I KNOW HER "IDENTITY."
HUH? FOR REAL?
WHISPER
I "ACCIDENTALLY" OVERHEARD GRANDPA LAST NIGHT.

...AS SHE SAID THIS WAS ONE OF PROFOUND SADNESS.
...THAT MAKES ME A "WITCH."
BUT BECAUSE HER EXPRESSION...
THEN I SUPPOSE ...

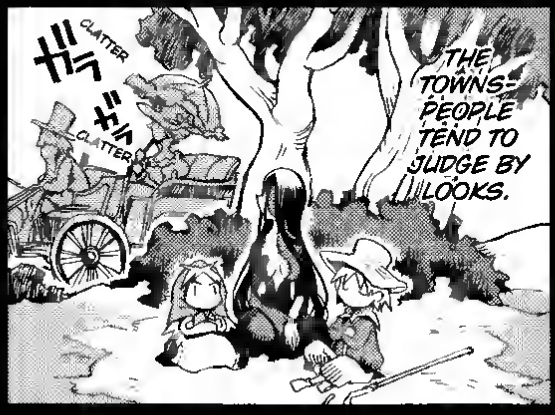
BUT SHE'S STILL YOUNG, SO THE BASIS OF HER "VOCABULARY" IS A LITTLE UNCERTAIN.
YEAH! THEY CALL HER A "WITCH"!
DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE WITCH WHO TURNED A PRINCE INTO A DRAGON?

I DON'T GET IT. BUT YOU'RE SEARCHING FOR SOMEONE.
THEN... IT WOULD BE BEST TO GO TO TOWN.
...TOWN?

I WANTED TO KNOW THE NAME OF THIS "WITCH."
THEN SHE SCRATCHED OUT SOMETHING ON THE GROUND WITH HER FINGERS.

BUT YOUR FACE AND GETUP...
...MIGHT SCARE THE FOLK IN TOWN.
THAT'S TRUE.

IT WAS PROBABLY HER NAME, BUT IRI AND I CAN'T READ.
?
THE SHAPES LOOK FAMILIAR AND ALL, BUT...

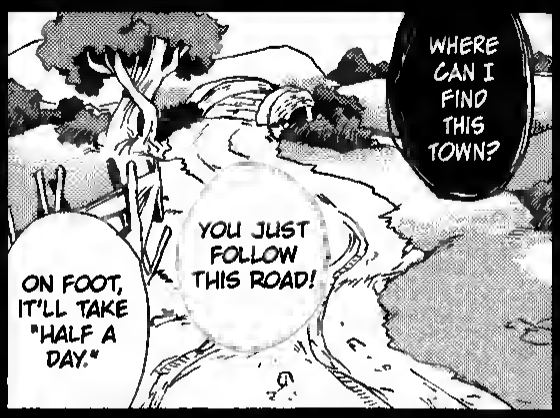

CLATTER
CLATTER
THE TOWNSPEOPLE TEND TO JUDGE BY LOOKS.

WHEN I WONDERED WHERE SHE CAME FROM...
...SHE SPOKE AGAIN.
I'M SEARCHING.

...IS THIS BETTER?
OH! YEAH.
THAT LOOKS NICE!

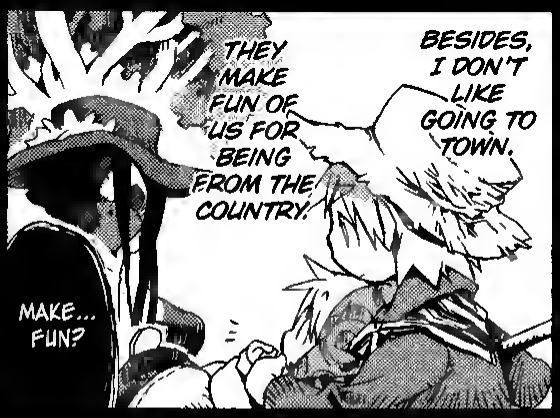
I'M SEARCHING FOR THE PERSON...
...WHO IS SEARCHING FOR ME.

I BET IT WAS VIVI WHO PUT SUCH WEIRD THINGS INTO HER HEAD...
...YOU SHOULD SAY THOSE "WORDS" IF A STRANGE MAN TALKS TO YOU!
BUT I HEARD...


WHERE CAN I FIND THIS TOWN?
YOU JUST FOLLOW THIS ROAD!
ON FOOT, IT'LL TAKE "HALF A DAY."

AND I NEED TO WATCH ENO!
I NEED TO WATCH THE FLOCK.
YOU TWO AREN'T GOING TO "TOWN"?

.....
WHEN ENO NEEDS TO GO, I "ACCOMPANY" HIM.
IN TOWN, THERE'RE LOTS OF PEOPLE AND SHOPS.


MAKE... FUN?
THEY MAKE FUN OF US FOR BEING FROM THE COUNTRY.
BESIDES, I DON'T LIKE GOING TO TOWN.

UM...
"WORDS" YOU CAN USE IN TOWN!
OH! I'LL TELL YOU SOMETHING ELSE YOU'LL NEED TO KNOW!

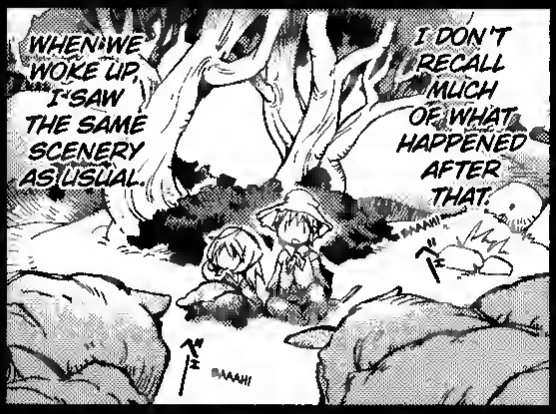
IF I WERE A WITCH, I WOULD USE MAGIC THAT ZIPPED THE LIPS OF GIRLS AND WOMEN EVERYWHERE.
"OH, ENO! I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU BROUGHT SOMETHING OTHER THAN WOOL, CHEESE, OR IR!!"
OH! UM, VIVI WOULD SAY SOMETHING LIKE THIS!

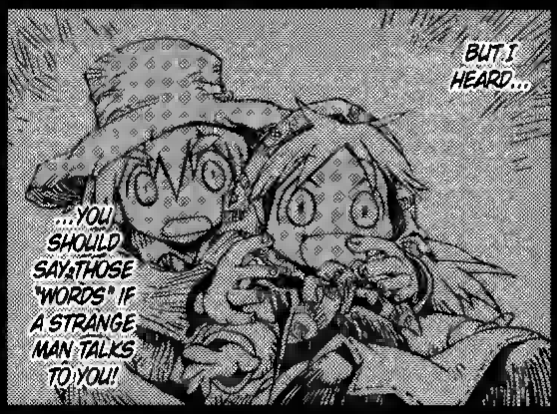
COME BACK WHEN YOU HAVE A BETTER PICK-UP LINE!
はぅ
CRUSH

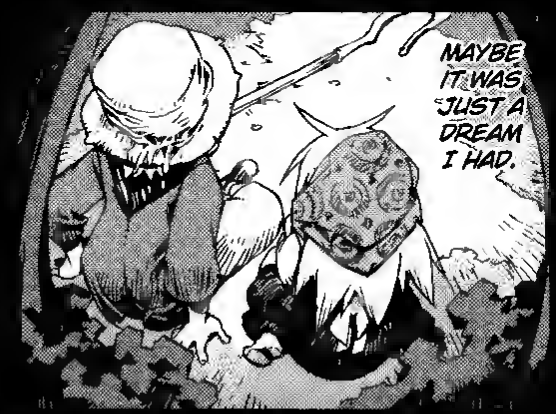
I DON'T REALLY KNOW WHAT "MAGIC" IS.
BUT...
.....?
...IS "SOMEONE" TO USE "MAGIC" ON, RIGHT?
THE PERSON YOU'RE LOOKING FOR...
MAGIC?
...IF WHAT'S INSIDE ME...
...IS "SOMETHING" ALONG THOSE LINES...
ACCORDING TO GRANDPA, A WITCH ALWAYS USES "MAGIC."
AND THERE ARE TWO TYPES OF WITCHES. GOOD WITCHES AND BAD WITCHES.
?
BUT A GOOD WITCH USES MAGIC TO HELP SOMEONE IN NEED.
A BAD WITCH WOULD CURSE SOMEONE AND MAKE THAT PERSON SUFFER.
...IF THAT'S THE CASE...
...WOULD YOU WANT IT?
WOULD YOU WANT MY "MAGIC"?
...WHICH TYPE OF WITCH IS THIS PERSON?

.....
I SEE.
I DON'T NEED IT.
.....
BUT HE'S OKAY AS LONG AS I'M HERE!
ENO MIGHT NEED A LITTLE.
?
I'LL LEARN LOTS OF WORDS, AND THAT WILL TAKE THE PLACE OF ENO'S WORDS.
THEN...
...THERE IS NO REASON FOR ME TO BE HERE.
...YOU SHOULD GO HELP OTHER PRINCESSES IN DISTRESS!
THAT'S WHY, MISS "WITCH"...

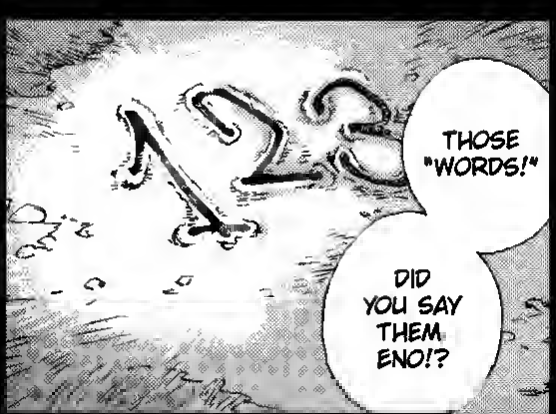
CAN YOU STOP HERE?
I SHALL GO.
SOME-WHERE ELSE.
EXCUSE ME, MI-LADY.
WHERE ARE YOU OFF TO?
SST
IF YOU LEAVE FOR TOWN NOW YOU WON'T GET THERE BEFORE SUNSET.
WOULD YOU LIKE TO RIDE WITH ME?
.....
I SHALL GRANT YOU...
...ONE OF MY VOICES.
"COME BACK WHEN YOU...
"...HAVE A BETTER PICK-UP LINE."
I DON'T KNOW...
...IF THIS IS WHAT YOU CALL "MAGIC."


WHEN WE WOKE UP, I SAW THE SAME SCENERY AS USUAL.
I DON'T RECALL MUCH OF WHAT HAPPENED AFTER THAT.
AAAH!
AAAH!


BUT I HEARD...
...YOU SHOULD SAY THOSE "WORDS" IF A STRANGE MAN TALKS TO YOU!


MAYBE IT WAS JUST A DREAM I HAD.

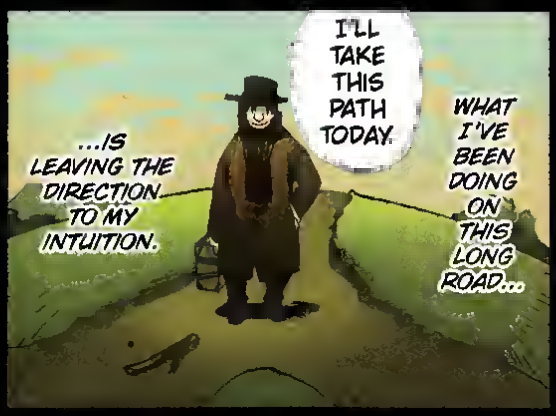
!?
LET'S GO BACK, IRI.
THE SUN'S GOING TO SET SOON.

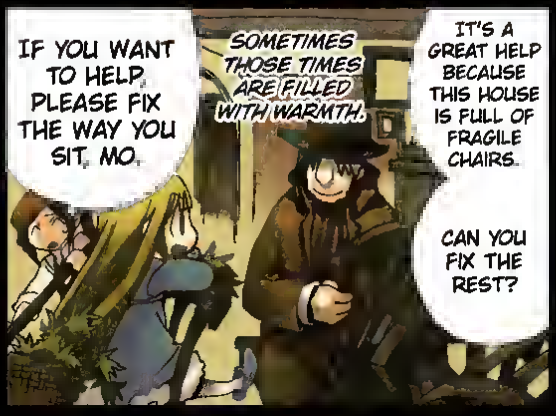

THOSE "WORDS!"
DID YOU SAY THEM, ENO!?

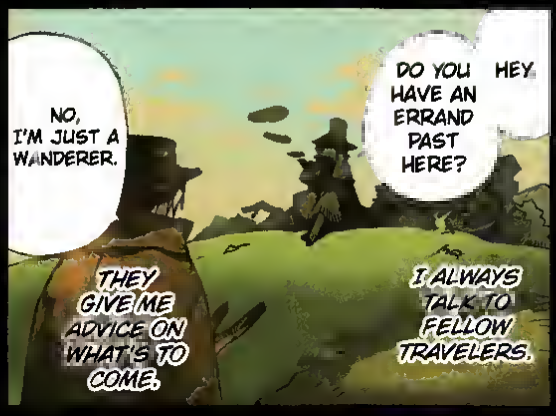
YOU SAID THAT I WAS...
...A "GOOD WITCH."
OH, I WANTED TO ASK YOU.
OH.
THAT'S SIMPLE ENOUGH.
YOU'RE A GOOD PERSON, SHE'S A BAD PERSON.
.....
BUT HOW AM I DIFFER-ENT...
...FROM THE WITCH YOU'RE LOOKING FOR?
BUT IT'S NOT UP TO US TO DECIDE WHICH IS WHICH.
WE CAN MAKE BOTH POISON AND MEDICINE.
BUT ISN'T IT HARD TO MAKE A DISTINCTION LIKE THAT?
WHEN SOMEONE CALLS YOU ONE, THAT'S WHEN YOU'RE A "WITCH."
A WITCH...
...ISN'T A NAME ONE CAN DECIDE FOR ONE-SELF.
THEN... WHAT IS A WITCH TO YOU?

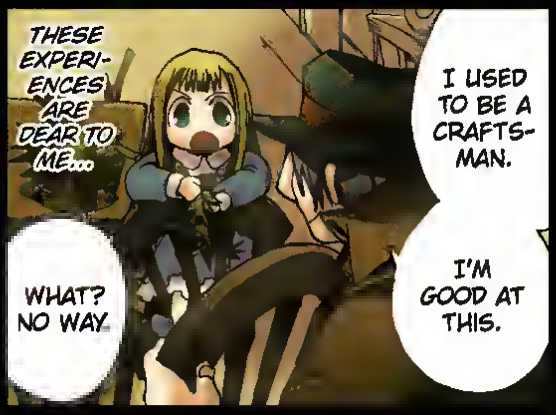
BELIEVING...
...THAT THIS ROAD I WALK...
—TO MY LOVED ONES.
...LEADS ME TO YOU...
...THE LAST LETTER YOU GET FROM ME.
THIS MAY BE...
...I'M CONTINUING ON MY JOURNEY.

AND I'VE MET MANY PEOPLE.
HERE, IT'S FIXED.
WOW! YOU FIXED IT IN NO TIME!
EVER SINCE I BECAME A TRAVELER, I'VE VISITED MANY PLACES.

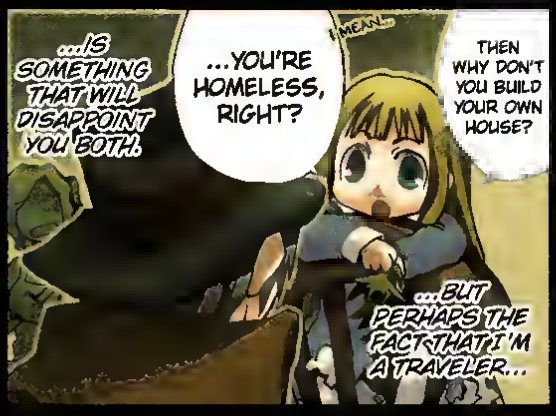

I'LL TAKE THIS PATH TODAY.
...IS LEAVING THE DIRECTION TO MY INTUITION.
WHAT I'VE BEEN DOING ON THIS LONG ROAD...

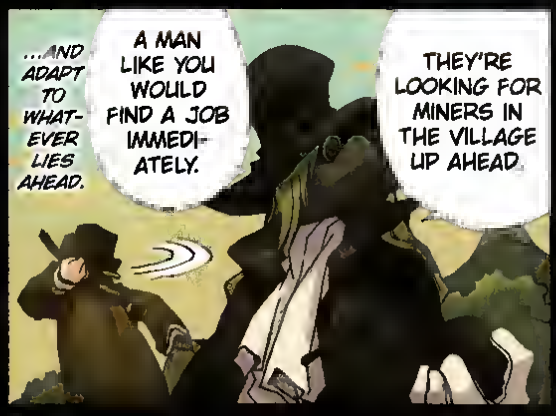

IF YOU WANT TO HELP, PLEASE FIX THE WAY YOU SIT, MO.
SOMETIMES THOSE TIMES ARE FILLED WITH WARMTH.
IT'S A GREAT HELP BECAUSE THIS HOUSE IS FULL OF FRAGILE CHAIRS.
CAN YOU FIX THE REST?

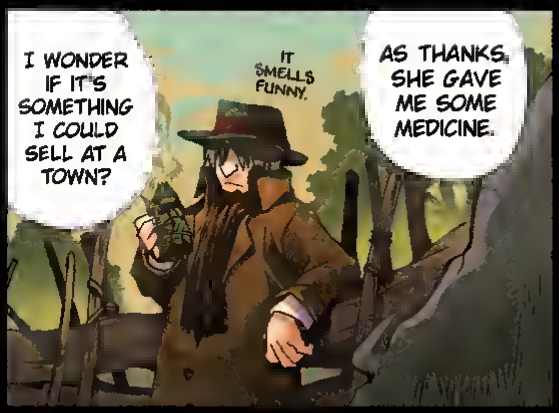

NO, I'M JUST A WANDERER.
HEY.
DO YOU HAVE AN ERRAND PAST HERE?
THEY GIVE ME ADVICE ON WHAT'S TO COME.
I ALWAYS TALK TO FELLOW TRAVELERS.

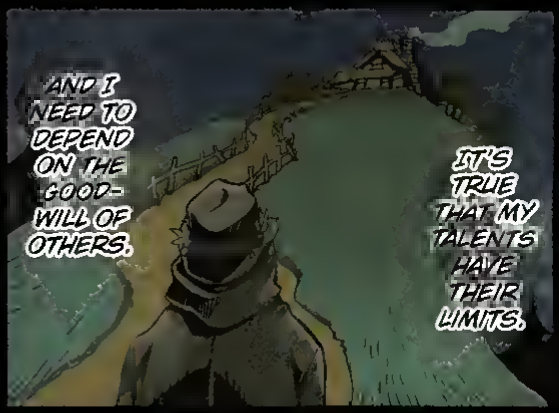

THESE EXPERI-ENCES ARE DEAR TO ME...
I USED TO BE A CRAFTS-MAN.
WHAT? NO WAY.
I'M GOOD AT THIS.

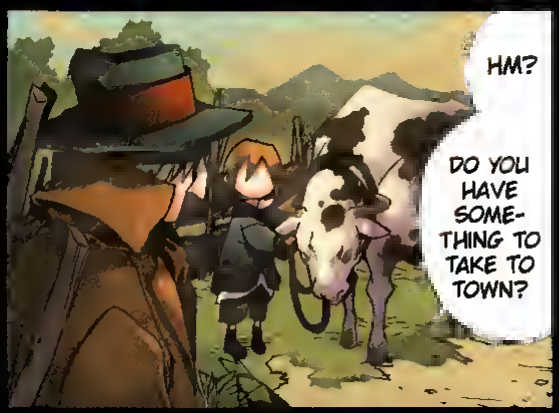
?
MAYBE THAT'S A GOOD THING...
...OR YOU SHOULD TURN BACK NOW.
AND I NEVER PLAN ANY-THING...


...IS SOMETHING THAT WILL DISAPPOINT YOU BOTH.
...YOU'RE HOMELESS, RIGHT?
I MEAN...
THEN WHY DON'T YOU BUILD YOUR OWN HOUSE?
...BUT PERHAPS THE FACT THAT I'M A TRAVELER...

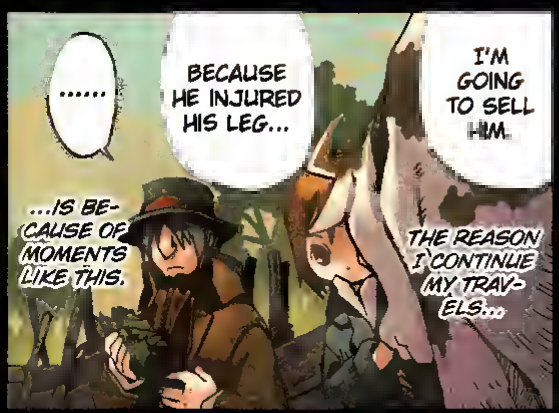

...AND ADAPT TO WHAT-EVER LIES AHEAD.
A MAN LIKE YOU WOULD FIND A JOB IMMEDI-ATELY.
THEY'RE LOOKING FOR MINERS IN THE VILLAGE UP AHEAD.

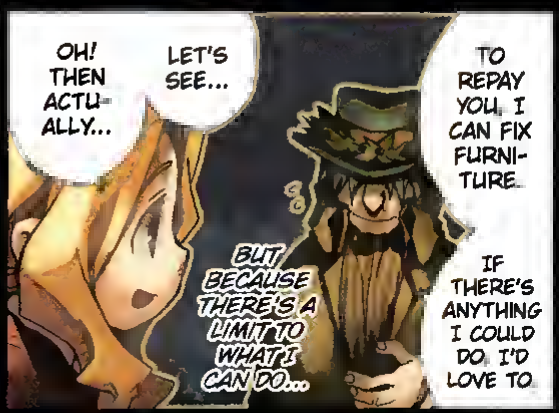

I WONDER IF IT'S SOMETHING I COULD SELL AT A TOWN?
IT SMELLS FUNNY.
AS THANKS, SHE GAVE ME SOME MEDICINE.

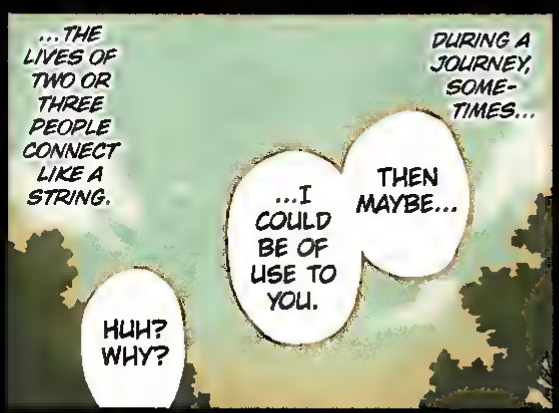

AND I NEED TO DEPEND ON THE GOOD-WILL OF OTHERS.
IT'S TRUE THAT MY TALENTS HAVE THEIR LIMITS.

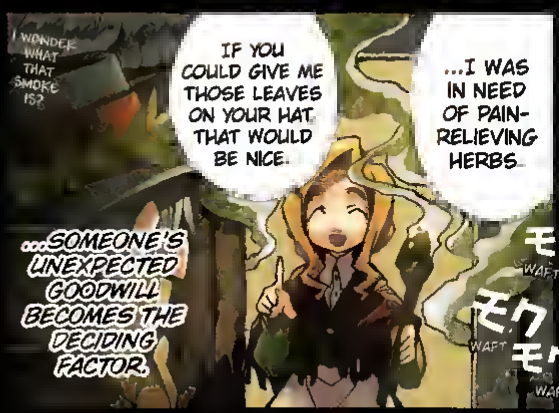

HM?
DO YOU HAVE SOME-THING TO TAKE TO TOWN?

I WAS WONDERING IF YOU MIGHT HAVE A PLACE FOR ME TO SLEEP FOR THE NIGHT.
HELLO. AND WHO MIGHT YOU BE?

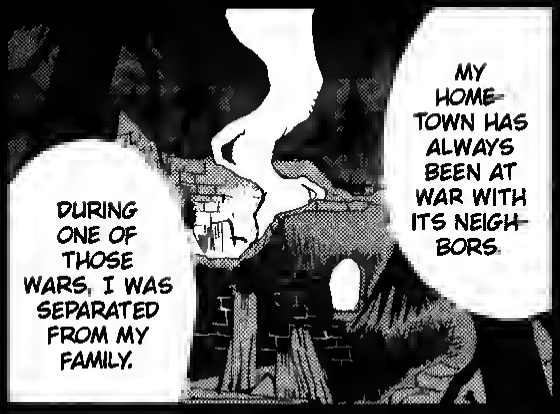

.....
BECAUSE HE INJURED HIS LEG...
I'M GOING TO SELL HIM.
...IS BE-CAUSE OF MOMENTS LIKE THIS.
THE REASON I CONTINUE MY TRAV-ELS...


OH! THEN ACTU-ALLY...
LET'S SEE...
TO REPAY YOU, I CAN FIX FURNI-TURE.
BUT BECAUSE THERE'S A LIMIT TO WHAT I CAN DO...
IF THERE'S ANYTHING I COULD DO, I'D LOVE TO

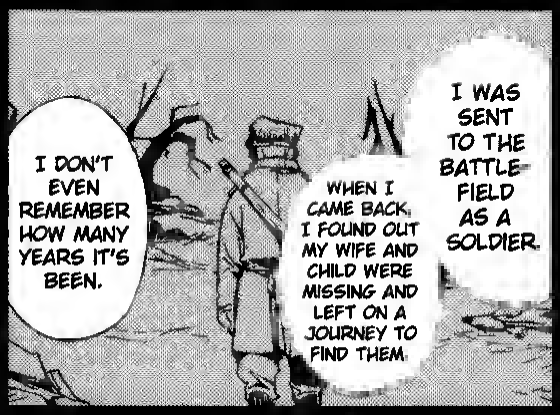

...THE LIVES OF TWO OR THREE PEOPLE CONNECT LIKE A STRING.
DURING A JOURNEY, SOME-TIMES...
...I COULD BE OF USE TO YOU.
THEN MAYBE...
HUH? WHY?

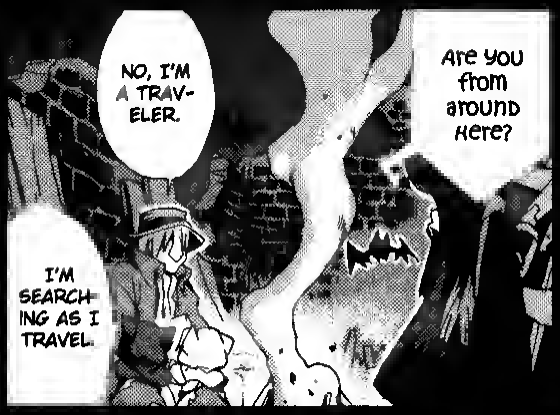

I WONDER WHAT THAT SMOKE IS?
IF YOU COULD GIVE ME THOSE LEAVES ON YOUR HAT THAT WOULD BE NICE.
...I WAS IN NEED OF PAIN-RELIEVING HERBS.
...SOMEONE'S UNEXPECTED GOODWILL BECOMES THE DECIDING FACTOR.
モク WAFT
モク WAFT
モク WAFT

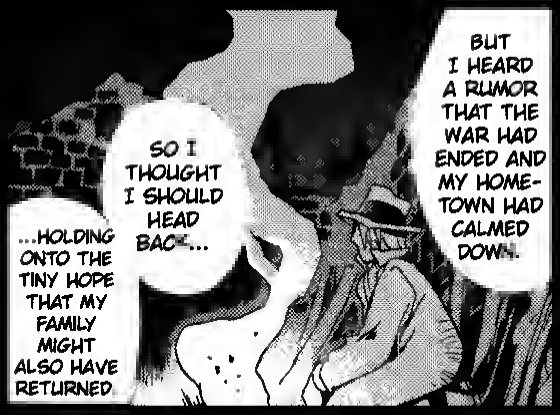
THESE STONES... AH.
THEN I'M NOT SO FAR FROM THE BORDER.
WHOA!! WHAT IS THAT!?
BUT I'VE BEEN HEARING GROWLING... LIKE THAT OF A BEAST.
GROWL
SINCE IT'S BEFORE WINTER, PERHAPS IT'S HUNGRY?
GROOWL
ARE YOU OKAY!? CAN YOU STAND!?
URGH... I SMELL FOOD.
FOOD? OH, I HAVE SOME CHEESE I JUST GOT...
RUSTLE
RUSTLE
RUSTLE
OR MAYBE...
...LIKE THE PERSON BEFORE, MAYBE IT COULD SMELL FOOD.
I SHOULD GET OUT OF HERE.
GROOWL
THE ROAD AROUND HERE WAS MISLEADING.
I HAD TO STOP MY BIKE MANY TIMES.
CHOMP
CHOMP
YOU'RE ACTUALLY IN BETTER SHAPE THAN I THOUGHT.
WHY WERE YOU ON THE GROUND?
Where'd they go?
NIJUKU SANJU
RUSTLE
GROOWL
GROWL
SNIFF
SNIFF
.....
I KEPT STOPPING, THINKING THEY WERE SILVER COINS.
THERE'RE SO MANY SHINY STONES LYING AROUND HERE.
I'LL GIVE THEM TO YOU AS A TOKEN OF APPRECIATION.
OP

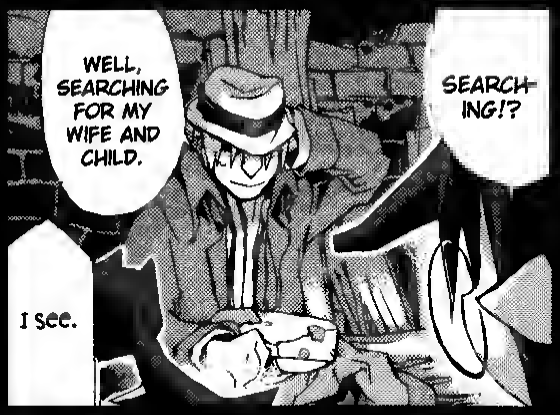

MY HOMETOWN HAS ALWAYS BEEN AT WAR WITH ITS NEIGHBORS.
DURING ONE OF THOSE WARS, I WAS SEPARATED FROM MY FAMILY.

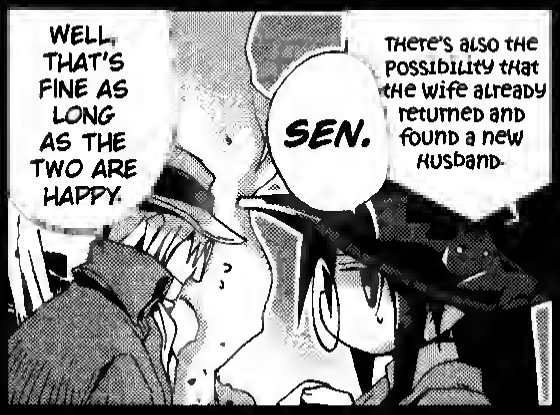
I'M REALLY SORRY.
IT'S OKAY.
Our two little ones are so greedy...


I WAS SENT TO THE BATTLEFIELD AS A SOLDIER.
WHEN I CAME BACK, I FOUND OUT MY WIFE AND CHILD WERE MISSING AND LEFT ON A JOURNEY TO FIND THEM.
I DON'T EVEN REMEMBER HOW MANY YEARS IT'S BEEN.


Are you from around here?
NO, I'M A TRAVELER.
I'M SEARCHING AS I TRAVEL.

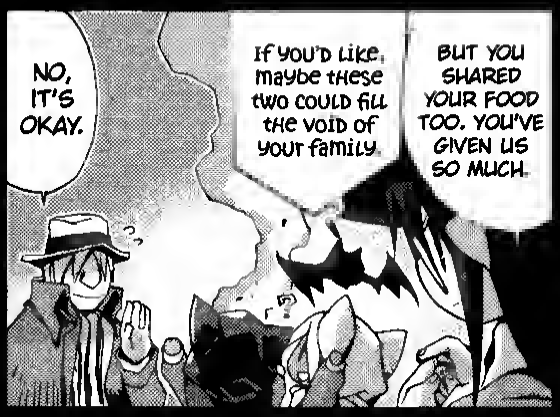

BUT I HEARD A RUMOR THAT THE WAR HAD ENDED AND MY HOMETOWN HAD CALMED DOWN.
SO I THOUGHT I SHOULD HEAD BACK...
...HOLDING ONTO THE TINY HOPE THAT MY FAMILY MIGHT ALSO HAVE RETURNED.


SEARCHING!?
WELL, SEARCHING FOR MY WIFE AND CHILD.
I see.

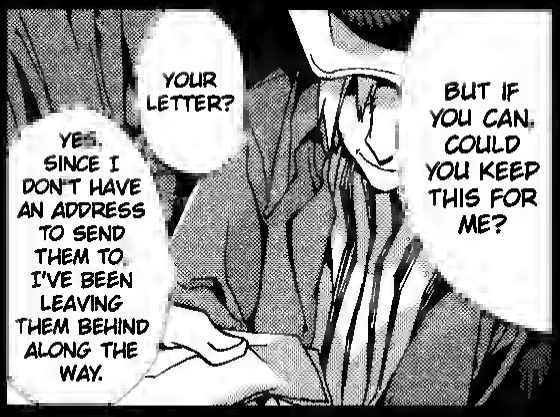

There's also the possibility that the wife already returned and found a new husband.
SEN.
WELL, THAT'S FINE AS LONG AS THE TWO ARE HAPPY.

Don't regret your past mistakes, sir.
All men are like travelers, seeking their dreams and freedom.
WHAT DOES SEN MEAN?
JUST A POT MOCKING A KETTLE.

SEEING YOUR COFFIN MADE ME REMEMBER...
...THERE WAS THIS SAYING IN SOME COUNTRY OR OTHER.
WHAT'S THIS?
WHAT DOES IT SAY?
HUH?
OH, THAT'S A LETTER TO MY FAMILY.
"DEATH IS NOT SOMETHING AHEAD OF YOU.
"INSTEAD IT'S STUCK BEHIND YOU ALL THE TIME."
GO AHEAD AND READ IT.
ARE YOU SURE?
IT'S NOTHING SPECIAL.
TO SAY THAT DEATH IS AT THE END OF LIFE IS PUTTING IT LEISURELY.
WE DON'T KNOW WHEN AND HOW WE'RE GOING TO DIE.
"TO MY LOVED ONES.
"THIS MAY BE THE LAST LETTER FROM ME."
I ALWAYS START WITH THOSE WORDS
SO THAT THEY WON'T GET ATTACHED.
THAT'S WHY WE'RE ALL SHOULDERING A COFFIN.
THE SAME GOES FOR ME.
OR MAYBE AS I CONTINUE MY TRAVELS ...
...THE MORE TIME PASSES, I COME UP WITH COMPROMISES.
MAYBE I'VE GIVEN UP ON SEEING THEM IN PERSON.


NO, IT'S OKAY.
If you'd like, maybe these two could fill the void of your family.
BUT YOU SHARED YOUR FOOD TOO. YOU'VE GIVEN US SO MUCH.

OKAY, I'M DONE.
YOU CAN HAVE IT.
HUH?


YOUR LETTER?
YES. SINCE I DON'T HAVE AN ADDRESS TO SEND THEM TO I'VE BEEN LEAVING THEM BEHIND ALONG THE WAY.
BUT IF YOU CAN, COULD YOU KEEP THIS FOR ME?

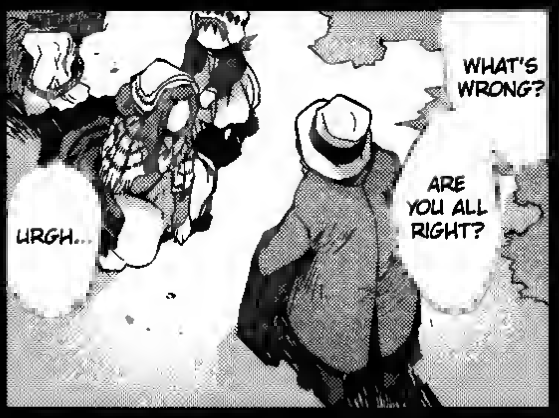
I OBTAINED THOSE STONES RECENTLY.
THEY'RE SOFT AND EASY TO MANIPULATE.
A piece of stone-work?

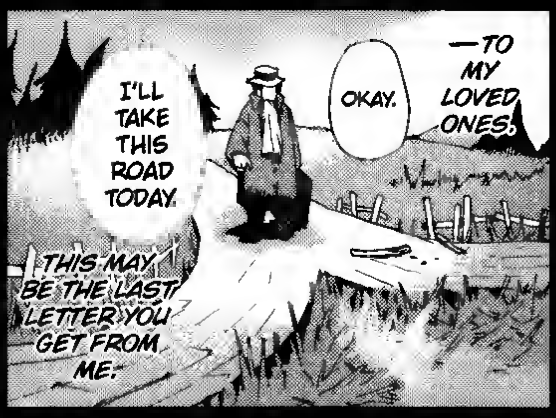
If we find your family, we'll let them know you went back home.
SURE.
BUT YOU WOULD BE MORE RELIABLE THAN A HOLLOW IN A TREE OR BETWEEN ROCKS.

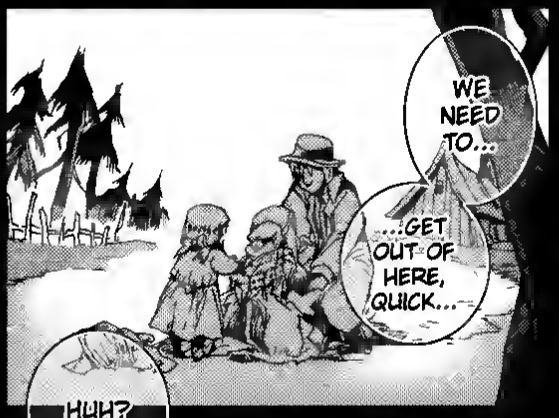
IT BROUGHT OUT THE BLUE OF HER EYES.
I'M SURE IT WILL LOOK GOOD WITH YOUR DEEP RED EYES AS WELL
I GAVE THE SAME THING TO MY WIFE A LONG TIME AGO.

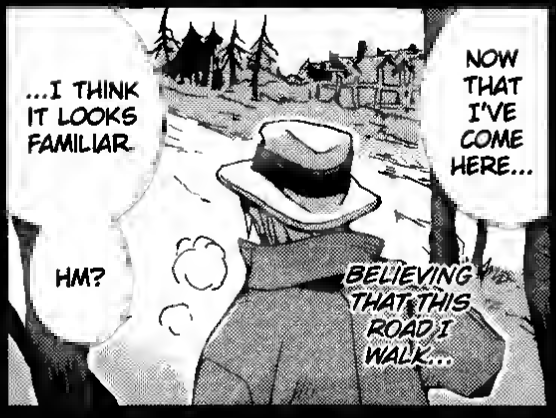
THANK YOU.
THIS GIVES ME HOPE FOR THE FUTURE.

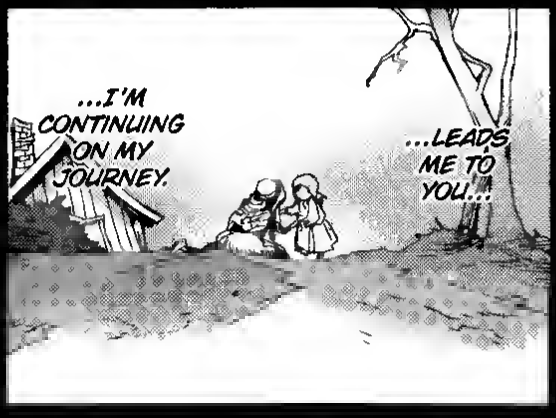
I'VE NEVER HAD A WOMAN REACT THIS WAY AFTER GIVING HER JEWELRY.
Maybe this is more a design for men.
...WHAT DO YOU THINK, SEN?


WHAT'S WRONG?
ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?
URGH...


—TO MY LOVED ONES.
OKAY.
I'LL TAKE THIS ROAD TODAY.
THIS MAY BE THE LAST LETTER YOU GET FROM ME.


WE NEED TO...
...GET OUT OF HERE, QUICK...
HUH?


NOW THAT I'VE COME HERE...
...I THINK IT LOOKS FAMILIAR.
HM?
BELIEVING THAT THIS ROAD I WALK...

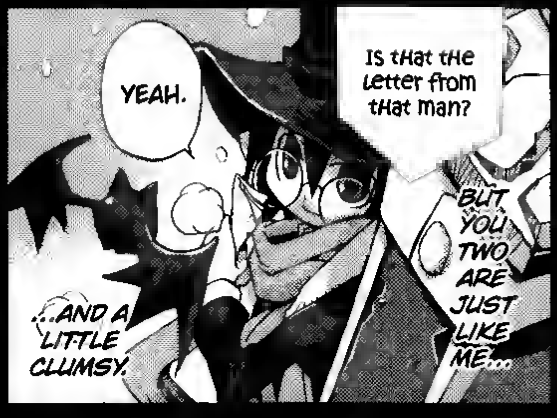

...I'M CONTINUING ON MY JOURNEY.
...LEADS ME TO YOU...

A WOMAN AND A CHILD...
COULD IT BE!?

Yeah, it's obvious where that came from.
IF I SEE HIS FAMILY, I'LL GIVE THEM THIS LETTER AND THE STONE.
PERHAPS, LIKE ME, YOU'RE TAKING THE LONG WAY...
...OR GETTING LOST SOMEWHERE.

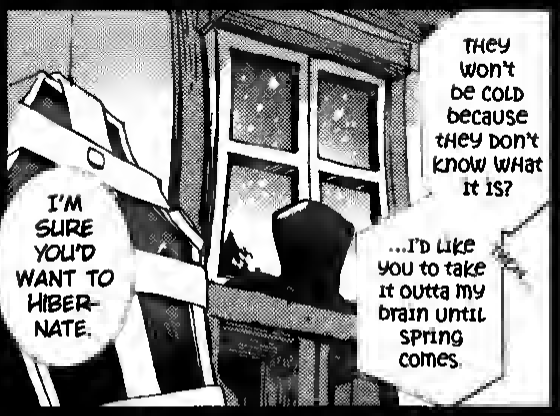
NOPE, NOTHING.
.....?
DID YOU HEAR SOMETHING?
...I BELIEVED WE WOULD SEE EACH OTHER AGAIN.
AS LONG AS WE'RE IN THE SAME WORLD...

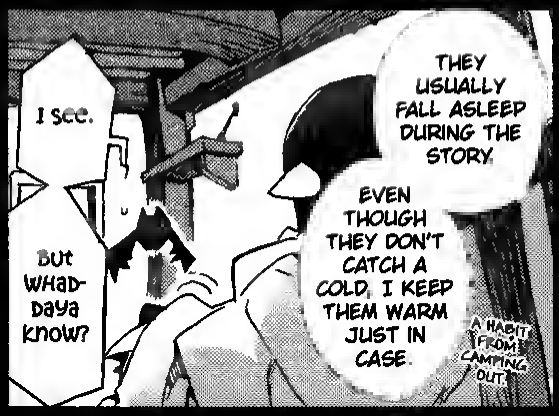
...REALLY WORRIED ABOUT THAT.
I'M JUST...


YEAH.
IS THAT THE LETTER FROM THAT MAN?
...AND A LITTLE CLUMSY.
BUT YOU TWO ARE JUST LIKE ME...

COLD?
MAYBE IT'S FROM THE COLD.
WHAT'S "COLD"?
What?
MY EARS ARE FUNNY.
THEY'RE STINGING.
I guess it's their first winter.
WHAT'S "COLD"?
WELL...
Maybe the hood doesn't suit her.
MY EARS DON'T HURT.
BUT WE ADDED THE POCKETS FOR THE EARS.
...MAYBE IT'S BETTER NOT TO KNOW NOW.
I'LL TELL YOU WHEN IT'S SPRING.

WE KNOW "WARM."
HOW DO YOU NOT KNOW "COLD"...
...BUT KNOW "WARM"?
IT'S WHEN WE SNUGGLE LIKE THIS!!


I'M SURE YOU'D WANT TO HIBER-NATE.
THEY WON'T BE COLD BECAUSE THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT IT IS?
...I'D LIKE YOU TO TAKE IT OUTTA MY BRAIN UNTIL SPRING COMES.


I see.
But whad-daya know?
THEY USUALLY FALL ASLEEP DURING THE STORY.
EVEN THOUGH THEY DON'T CATCH A COLD, I KEEP THEM WARM JUST IN CASE.
A HABIT FROM CAMPING OUT.

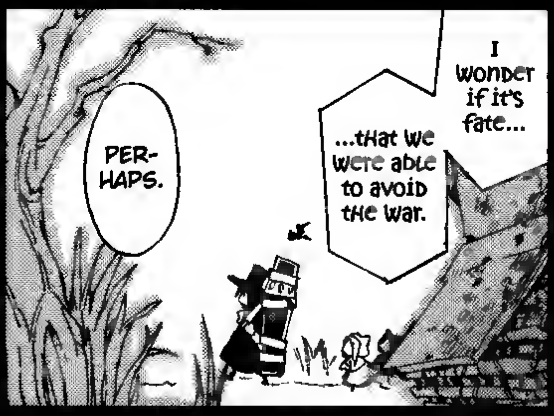
KURO-CHA, KURO-CHA.
CAN YOU TELL US A STORY AGAIN?
HUH? SURE.

You can forgive them that much.
Before one knows, eh?

WELL, COME HERE.
'KAY!!

HUH?
DID YOU SAY SOME-THING?

Wait a minute.
I DON'T KNOW WHERE TO START.
IT'S SO WARM.
GET INSIDE.
WARM.
NOW! THE STORY OF THE PRINCE WHO WAS TURNED INTO A FROG.


I wonder if it's fate...
...that we were able to avoid the war.
PER-HAPS.

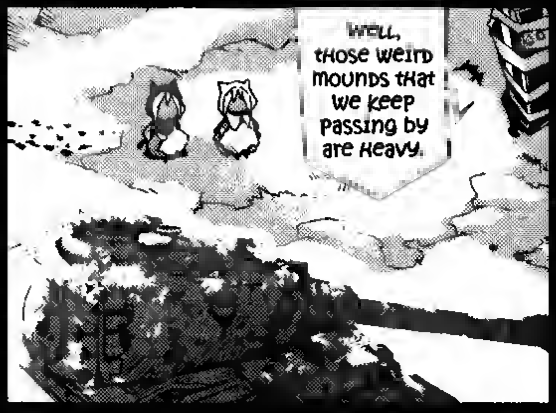
HOW ARE YOUR EARS TODAY?
STILL STINGING.
I CAN FEEL IT TOO.

But I'm amazed.
The lady's accent was so heavy. I couldn't understand half of what she said.
HUH? I DIDN'T THINK SO.

...THERE'S SOMETHING ECHOING DEEP IN MY EARS.
FOR A LONG TIME...
Ringing?

MAYBE BECAUSE SHE WAS SPEAKING IN A LOW VOICE.
Don't treat me like a bat only at times like these.
WHAT'S "HEAVY"?
WHAT IS IT?

I HEAR BOOM! AND THUD!
OH, YOU SHOULDN'T GO THAT WAY.
YOU SHOULDN'T GO NORTH OF THE FOREST.
WHY NOT?

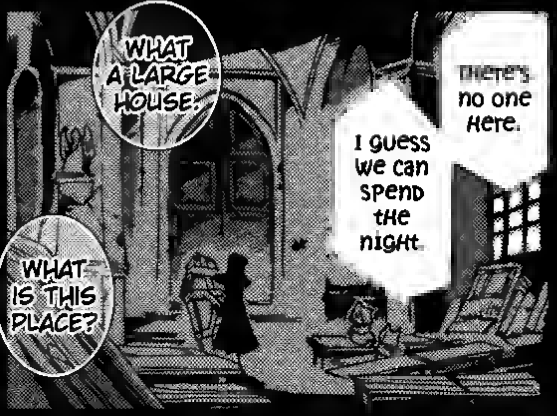

Well, those weird mounds that we keep passing by are heavy.

THE AREA'S BECOME A WAR ZONE.
WHISH
I CAN'T BELIEVE HOW BRIEF PEACE IS.
IF YOU CAME A FEW DAYS EARLIER, YOU MIGHT HAVE GOTTEN CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF IT.

I'M GOING TO SLEEP EARLY.
MY HANDS AND FEET DIDN'T MOVE AS WELL FROM THE COLD TODAY.
OLD AGE?
YOU'RE getting weaker to the cold by the year.

LET'S HEAD FOR THAT CHURCH OVER THERE.
It's already so dark.
THIS is a hassle during winter.
AND YOU GUYS ON FOOT ARE SLOWER.

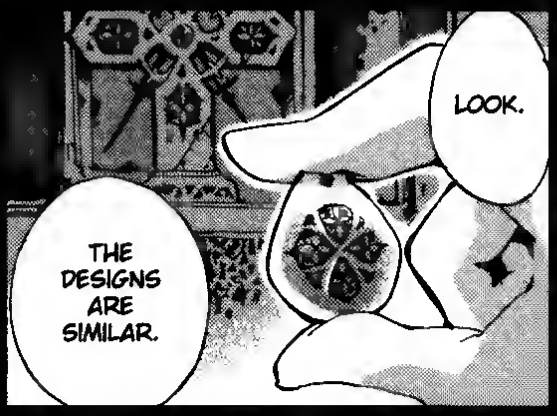
ARE YOU GONNA TELL US A STORY?
KURO-CHAN! KURO-CHAN!

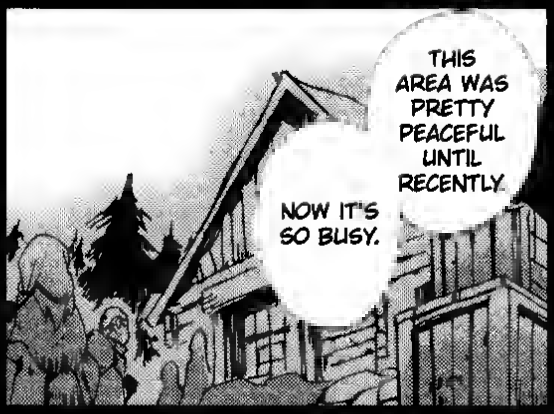

WHAT A LARGE HOUSE.
There's no one here.
I guess we can spend the night.
WHAT IS THIS PLACE?

SURE.
COME HERE.

YEAH, IT WAS ON MY MIND.
THIS AREA IS CLOSE TO HIS HOME.
OH? IS THAT THE...
...stone you got from the traveler?

WE DON'T REMEMBER!!
YOU DON'T?
WHERE DID I STOP LAST TIME?
IT WAS THE STORY ABOUT THE PRINCE WHO WAS TURNED INTO A FROG.

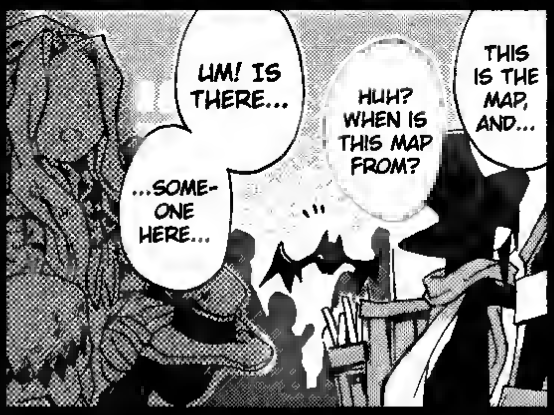

LOOK.
THE DESIGNS ARE SIMILAR.

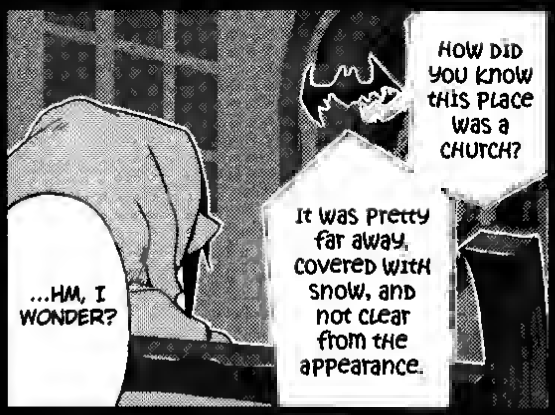

THIS AREA WAS PRETTY PEACEFUL UNTIL RECENTLY.
NOW IT'S SO BUSY.

LOOK.
THEY'RE ALREADY ASLEEP?

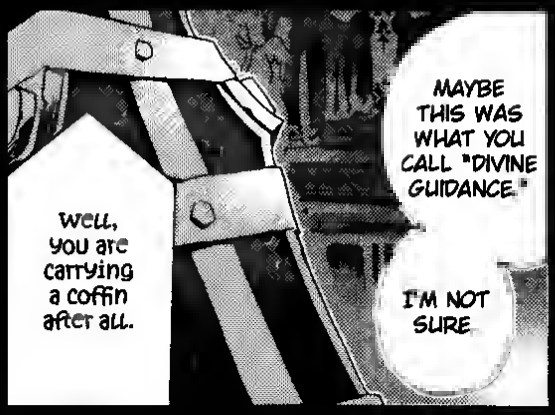
I'M JUST A TRAVELER PASSING THROUGH.
I'D LIKE TO GET A BETTER IDEA OF THE WAR ZONE.
SO YOU'RE A REFUGEE FROM WHICH AREA?
CARRYIN' A COFFIN AND ALL AT THAT...

THAT'S WHY I ALWAYS TELL THE SAME ONE.
THEY SLEEP FASTER WHEN YOU CURL UP WITH THEM
I DON'T THINK THEY CARE MUCH ABOUT THE STORY
THAT FIGURES.

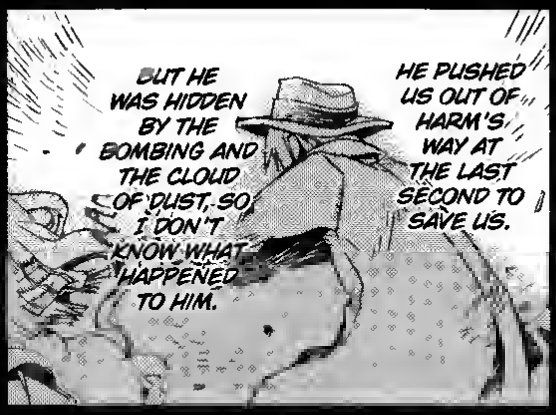

UM! IS THERE...
...SOMEONE HERE...
HUH? WHEN IS THIS MAP FROM?
THIS IS THE MAP, AND...


HOW DID YOU KNOW THIS PLACE WAS A CHURCH?
IT WAS PRETTY FAR AWAY, COVERED WITH SNOW, AND NOT CLEAR FROM THE APPEARANCE.
...HM, I WONDER?

...WHO KNOWS ANYTHING ABOUT THE MAN...
...WHO OWNED THIS HAT?


MAYBE THIS WAS WHAT YOU CALL "DIVINE GUIDANCE."
I'M NOT SURE
WELL, YOU ARE CARRYING A COFFIN AFTER ALL.

OUCH!


BUT HE WAS HIDDEN BY THE BOMBING AND THE CLOUD OF DUST, SO I DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM.
HE PUSHED US OUT OF HARM'S WAY AT THE LAST SECOND TO SAVE US.

IT HURTS.
NIJUKU?
WHAT'S WRONG, LITTLE GIRL!?
MY EARS ARE STINGING.

HE WAS SHOUTING SOMETHING AT THE END...
...I SEE.
.....
...BUT I COULDN'T UNDER-STAND IT.

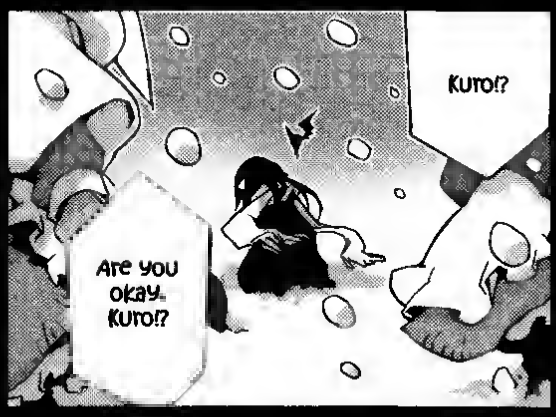
!?
SHOW IT TO ME.
IS IT FROST-BITE?

IF YOU REMEMBER IT, PLEASE TELL ME
I'D LIKE TO TELL HIS FAMILY ONE DAY.
UM, IT WAS...

KUTO!?
SLAM
WHERE ARE YOU GOING!?

.....
...WHAT?

Calm down, Kuro.
or else...
Hey!! Wait, Kuro!!
What's going on!?
SPLAT
I'M GOING TO LOOK FOR THAT MAN.
What!? Don't be stupid...
I DON'T CARE IF I FIND HIS CORPSE. I NEED TO MAKE SURE.
URGH...
WHY...
...DID HE...
...KNOW MY MOTHER AND MY NAME ...!?


KURO!?
Are you okay, Kuro!?

KURO!! KURO!!
Dammit! Another "attack"!!

KURO-CHA.
.....

KURO-CHAN...
DON'T COME NEAR ME!!

WE'LL BE...
...WAITING FOR A STORY AGAIN TODAY.

HFF!
HFF!
DON'T COME ANY CLOSER.
DON'T LOOK!

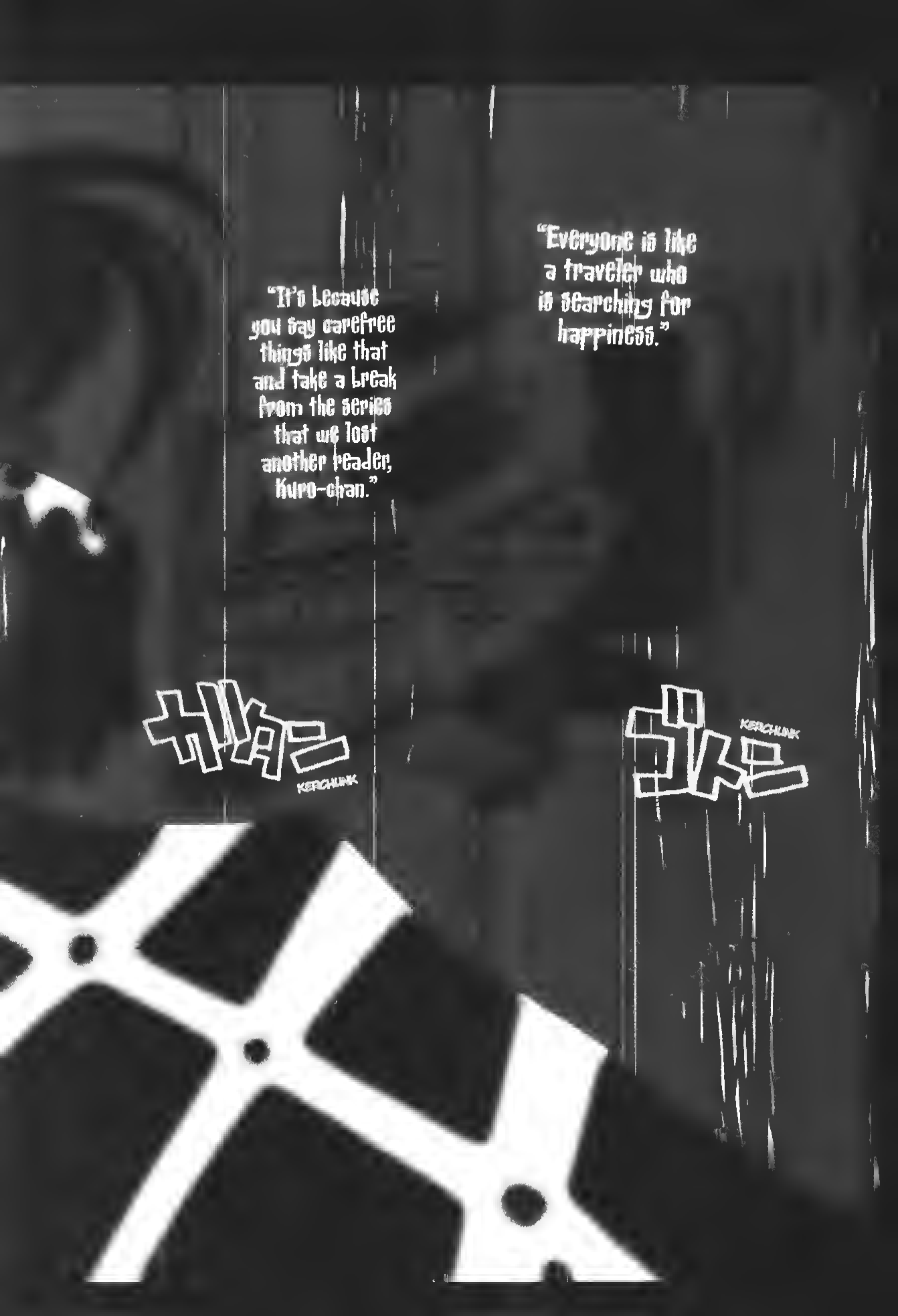
HFF!
HFF!
.....
...KURO-CHAN WILL ALWAYS...
IF WE SAY THIS...
BECAUSE WE KNOW.
...THROW HER ARMS OPEN WIDE FOR US.
AND KURO-CHAN SAID QUIETLY...
...THAT IT WAS "COLD."
...FOR A LONG, LONG TIME.
AND SHE DIDN'T WAKE UP...
KURO-CHA?

THANK YOU FOR READING THE THIRD VOLUME OF *SHOULDER-A-COFFIN KURO*.

I TOOK A LONG BREAK, AND IT CAUSED A LOT OF TROUBLE FOR EVERYONE INVOLVED, INCLUDING THE READERS. I WOULD LIKE TO TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO GIVE MY SINCEREST APOLOGIES.

KURO IS AT A TURNING POINT IN HER JOURNEY. IT WOULD MAKE ME HAPPY IF YOU COULD CONTINUE TO WATCH OVER HER.

SATOKO KIYUDUKI


"Everyone is like a traveler who is searching for happiness."
"It's because you say carefree things like that and take a break from the series that we lost another reader, Kuro-chan."
KERCHUNK
KERCHUNK

Kuro

shoulder-to-coffin

vol. 3

SHOULDER-A-COFFIN KURO 3

SATOKO KIYUDUKI

Translation: Satsuki Yamashita Lettering: Lys Blakeslee

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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